Income poverty, unemployment and social grants

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

The Constitution of South Africa, section 27 (1)(c), says that "everyone has the right to have access to … social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance".[1]

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 27, states that every child has the right "to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" and obliges the state "in case of need" to "provide material assistance". Article 26 guarantees "every child the right to benefit from social security".[2]

Children living in income poverty

This indicator shows the number and share of children living in households that are income-poor. Because money is needed to access goods and services, income poverty is often closely related to poor health and nutrition, reduced access to education and early childhood development (ECD) facilities, and living conditions that compromise health and personal safety.

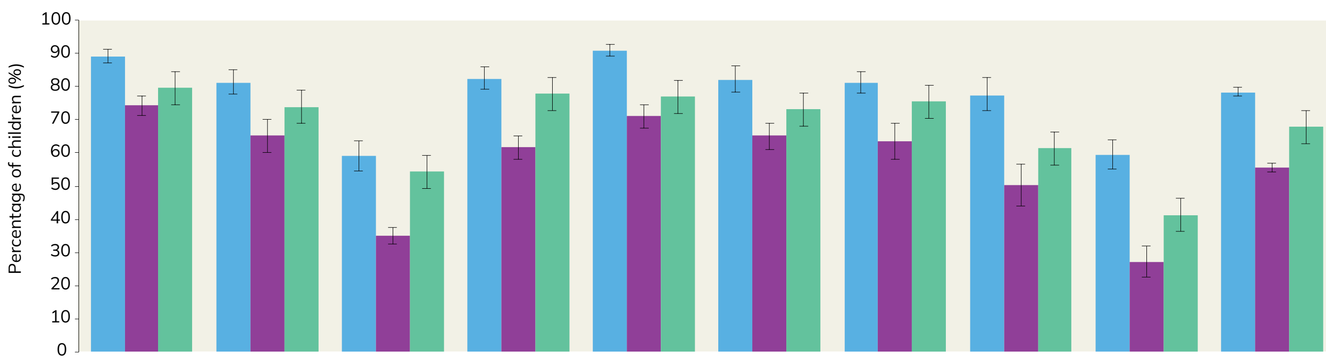
International law and the Constitution recognise the link between income and the realisation of basic human rights, and acknowledge that children have the right to social assistance (social grants) when families cannot meet children's basic needs. Income poverty measures are therefore important for determining how many people need social assistance, and for evaluating the state's progress in realising the right to social assistance.

No poverty line is perfect. Using a single income measure tells us nothing about how resources are distributed between family members, or how money is spent. But this measure does give some indication of how many children are living in households with severely constrained resources.

The poverty threshold used is the Statistics South Africa's (Stats SA) 'upper bound' poverty line that was set at R779 per person per month in 2011 prices. The poverty lines increase with inflation and in 2024 the real value of the upper bound line was R1,634.[3] Per capita income is calculated by adding all reported earnings for household members older than 15 years, adding the value of social grants received by anyone in the household, and dividing the total household income by the number of household members.

Figure 2a: Children living in income poverty, by province, 2003, 2019 & 2024

(Upper bound poverty line: Households with monthly per capita income less than R1,634, in 2024 Rands)



		EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	SA
2003		89,0%	81,1%	59,1%	82,3%	90,8%	82,0%	81,1%	77,4%	59,4%	78,3%
		2,544,000	813,000	1,759,000	3,349,000	2,165,000	1,237,000	941,000	302,000	961,000	14,070,000
2019		74,3%	65,3%	35,0%	61,7%	71,1%	65,1%	63,6%	50,4%	27,1%	55,6%
		1,902,000	662,000	1,514,000	2,593,000	1,724,000	1,095,000	905,000	216,000	544,000	11,156,000
2024		79,6%	73,9%	54,4%	77,8%	76,9%	73,2%	75,4%	61,4%	41,3%	67,8%
		1,993,000	769,000	2,598,000	3,382,000	1,945,000	1,312,000	1,085,000	272,000	882,000	14,239,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2020; 2025) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2019; General Household Survey 2024.* Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

Stats SA publishes two other poverty lines:

- The 'lower bound' poverty line is calculated by adding to the food poverty line the average expenditure on essential non-food items by households whose food expenditure is below but close to the food poverty line. The value of the lower bound poverty line in 2011 prices was R501 per person per month (R1 109 in 2024 prices). *Those living below this line would not be able to pay for the minimum non-food expenses or would be sacrificing their basic nutrition to pay for non-food expenses.*
- The 'food' poverty line is based on the cost of the minimum nutritional requirement of 2,100 kilocalories per person per day, without any allowance for other basic necessities. The value of the food poverty line in 2011 prices was R335 per person per month (R796 in 2024). A*nyone living below this line will be malnourished and their health and survival may be at risk*.

We use the upper bound poverty line as our main indicator for tracking child poverty, as this is linked to the minimum requirement for basic nutrition and other basic needs such as clothing and shelter. In other words, the upper bound line is the only poverty line that meets the minimum requirement for children's basic needs.

Child poverty rates reduced substantially following the introduction of the Child Support Grant (CSG), but a large number of children remain in poverty. In 2019, 56% of children (11.2 million) lived below the upper bound poverty line and 33% were below the food poverty line. Income poverty rates had fallen substantially since 2003, when 78% of children (14.1 million) were defined as 'poor' at the upper bound threshold and 53% were below the food poverty line. The reduction in the child poverty headcount over this period was mainly the result of a massive increase in the reach of the CSG.

Child poverty rates increased in the COVID-19 lockdown year of 2020, with the upper bound poverty rate rising by seven percentage points to 63%, and the child food poverty rate rising by six percentage points to 39%. Average poverty rates levelled off in 2021, although they did not decline. Poverty rates then increased again in most provinces in 2022 and remained at that higher level in 2023 and 2024. Across all the poverty measures, poverty rates were higher in 2024 than they were in the pre-lockdown year of 2019. In terms of population numbers, this translates as an additional 1.2 million children below the food poverty line, and an additional 3.1 million children below the upper-bound poverty line, compared with 2019. Given that the child population has grown over the past two decades, the poverty headcount in 2024 was similar to that in 2003, despite an overall reduction in the poverty rate over the two decades. There are substantial differences in poverty rates across the provinces. Using the upper bound poverty line, over 75% of children in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and North West are poor. Gauteng and the Western Cape have the lowest child poverty rates, although there was a substantial increase in poverty in both these provinces – from 35% in 2019 to 54% in 2024 in Gauteng, and from 27% to 41% in the Western Cape. Child poverty remains most prominent in the rural areas of the former homelands, where 86% of children were below the poverty line in 2024. However, poverty rates have also risen sharply among urban children, with the upper bound poverty rate in urban areas standing at 56% in 2024 (up from 41% in 2019), and the urban food poverty rate at 25% (up from 21%).

There are glaring racial disparities in income poverty: 74% of African children lived in households below the upper bound poverty line in 2024 (up from 61% in 2019). Although poverty rates among Coloured children are consistently lower than for African children, the increase in poverty was even more pronounced in the Coloured population over the period, with upper bound poverty rates rising from 33% in 2019 to 48% in 2024. The lockdown period had no significant impact on poverty rates among Indian and White children.

There are no significant differences in child poverty levels across gender or between different age groups in the child population.

Using Stats SA's lower bound poverty line (which only provides for basic essentials if people make food sacrifices), 51% of children (10.8 million) were poor in 2024 (up from 44% in 2019), and 37% (7.8 million children) were below the food poverty line, meaning that they were not getting enough nutrition.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015 and set a global agenda for development by 2030. Target 1.1 is to eradicate extreme poverty using the international poverty line, which was originally set at $1 per day by the MDGs, then increased to $1.25. It was revised upwards for the SDGs, to $1.90 and again to $2.15. In July 2025, the World Bank announced a further increase in the international ultra-poverty line, raising it to $3 per day.[4] This would translate to R654 per person per month in 2024, using the International Monetary Fund purchasing power parity conversion.[5] This poverty line is extremely low – below survival level – and is not appropriate for South Africa. No child should be below it. In 2024, a quarter of all children in South Africa (24%) lived below the international poverty line.

Children living in households without an employed adult

This indicator measures unemployment from a children's perspective and gives the number and proportion of children who live in households where no adults are employed in either the formal or informal sector. It therefore shows the proportion of children living in 'unemployed' households where it is unlikely that any household members derive income from labour or income-generating activities. Unemployment in South Africa continues to be a serious problem, and the situation worsened during lockdown. The official national unemployment rate was 29.1% in the fourth quarter of 2019 and 32.5% in the fourth quarter of 2020. It increased further to a high of 35% in the third quarter of 2021 before recovering to 32% in the second half of 2023. It remained around that level through 2024.[7] This official rate is based on a narrow definition of unemployment that includes only those adults who are defined as economically active (ie they are not studying or retired or voluntarily staying at home) and who had also actively looked but failed to find work in the four weeks preceding the survey.

An expanded definition of unemployment, which includes 'discouraged work-seekers' who are unemployed but did not actively look for work in the month preceding the survey, gives a higher, and more accurate, indication of the unemployment problem. In the second quarter of 2020, the expanded unemployment rate breached the 40% mark for the first time since the Quarterly Labour Force Survey was introduced in 2008.[8] Although there was some clawback of jobs, the expanded unemployment rate remained above 40% throughout 2021 to 2024. By the first quarter of 2025, nearly 12 million people were unemployed, out of a potential labour force of 28.5 million.[9]

Gender differences in employment rates are relevant for children, as it is mainly women who provide for children's care and material needs. Unemployment rates are consistently higher for women than for men. In the last quarter of 2024, the expanded unemployment rate for women was 43%. Of the 13.4 million women who were available and willing to work, 5.8 million could not find work or had given up trying to do so.[9]

Apart from providing regular income, an employed adult may bring other benefits to the household, including health insurance, unemployment insurance and parental leave that can contribute to children's health, development and education. The definition of 'employment' is derived from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey and includes regular or irregular work for wages or salary, as well as various forms of self-employment, including unpaid work in a family business.

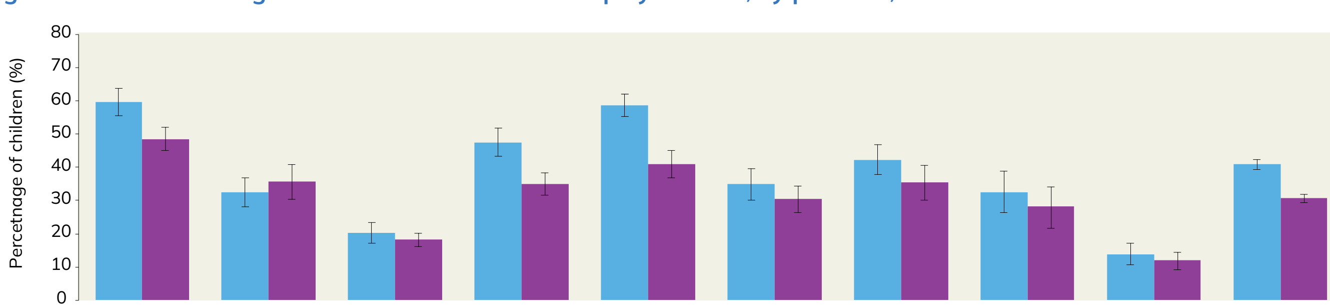
In 2019, before lockdown, 70% of children in South Africa lived in households with at least one working adult. The other 30% lived in households where no adults were working. The number of children living in workless households had decreased by 1.4 million since 2003, when 41% of children lived in households where there was no employment. But by late 2020, the share of children in workless households had increased again to 36% (7.3 million). By 2024 the rate had dropped again, almost regaining pre-lockdown levels. While this shows some recovery, the number of children in households that do not receive income from employment remains worryingly high: nearly 6.5 million children (31%) lived in households where no adults were earning income from employment in 2024.

This indicator is very closely related to the income poverty indicator, in that provinces with relatively high proportions of children living in unemployed households also have high rates of child poverty. In 2024, nearly 50% of children in the Eastern Cape and 41% in Limpopo lived in households without any employed adults, while over a third of those in North West, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal were in workless households. These provinces are home to large numbers of children and also have relatively high rates of child poverty. In contrast, Gauteng and the Western Cape have the lowest poverty and unemployment rates, although the effects of job loss were also evident in these provinces in 2020. In the Western Cape, 22% of children lived in households where nobody was working in 2020 (up from 12% in 2019), and in Gauteng the rate was 23% in 2020 (up from 14% in 2019). By 2024 the Western Cape rates had dropped again to 12% but the Gauteng rate remained persistently high at 18%.

As with the poverty indicators, racial inequalities are marked: 34% of African children had no working adult at home in 2024, while 16% of Coloured children and less than 5% of Indian and White children lived in households without employment income. There are no significant differences in child-centred unemployment measures when comparing girls and boys or different age groups. In the rural former homelands, 47% of children lived in workless households in 2024, while the rate was 20% among children in urban areas.

Income inequality is clearly associated with unemployment. Over 70% of children in the poorest income quintile live in households where no adults are employed.

Figure 2b: Children living in households without an employed adult, by province, 2003 & 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
2003	59,7%	32,4%	20,3%	47,6%	58,7%	34,9%	42,2%	32,6%	13,9%	40,8%
	1,706,000	325,000	603,000	1,935,000	1,400,000	527,000	490,000	127,000	225,000	7,338,000
2024	48,5%	35,8%	18,2%	35,0%	41,0%	30,5%	35,6%	28,3%	12,1%	30,7%
	1,216,000	373,000	870,000	1,521,000	1,037,000	547,000	512,000	126,000	258,000	6,460,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2004; 2025) *General Household Survey 2003; General Household Survey 2024*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

Children receiving the Child Support Grant

This indicator shows the number of children receiving the Child Support Grant (CSG), as reported by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) which disburses social grants on behalf of the Department of Social Development.

The right to social assistance is designed to ensure that people living in poverty can meet basic subsistence needs. Government is obliged to support children directly when their caregivers are too poor to do so. Income support for poor children is provided through the CSG – an unconditional cash grant paid to the caregivers of eligible children.

Introduced in 1998 with an initial value of R100, the CSG has become the single biggest programme for alleviating child poverty in South Africa. The grant amount was originally linked to the minimum cost of feeding and clothing a child. Its monthly value is increased slightly each year, more or less keeping pace with headline inflation although it has fallen behind food inflation. As a result, the value of the CSG has been eroded relative to the food poverty line, and the CSG no longer covers the cost of a child's minimum nutritional needs.

At the end of March 2025, a monthly CSG of R560 was paid to 13.1 million children aged 0 – 17 years – slightly down from 13.2 million the previous year.

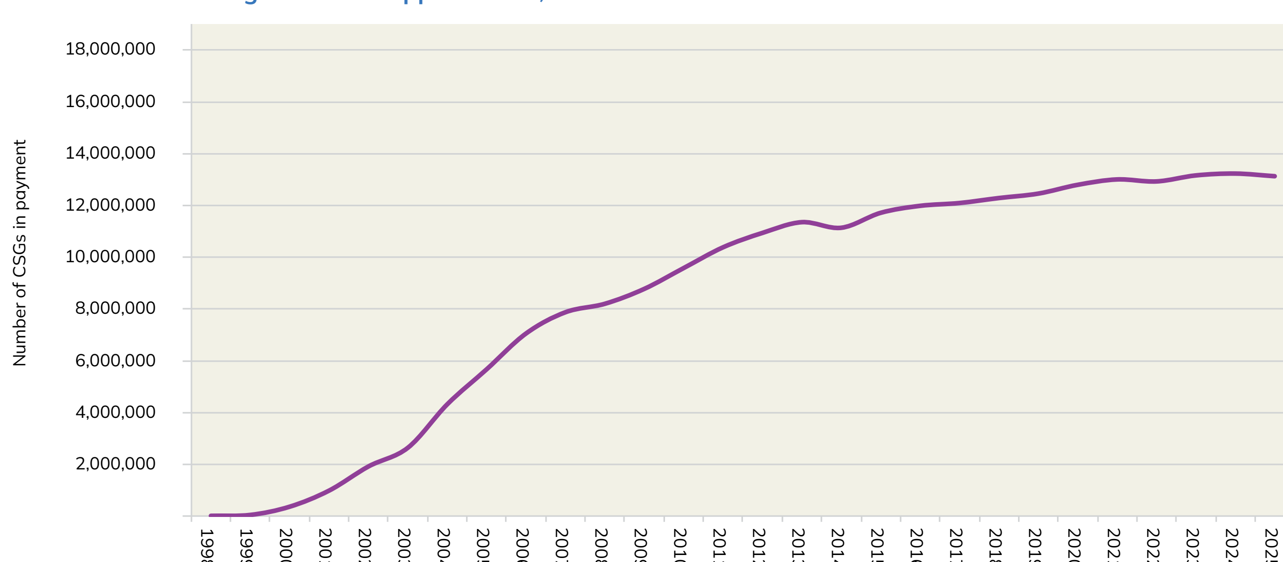
Because the CSG is targeted to poor children, a simple means test is used to determine eligibility. The income threshold is set at 10 times the amount of the grant. This means that every time the grant is increased, the means test also increases. From April 2025, the income threshold was R5 600 per month for a single caregiver and double that if the caregiver is married (R11 200 per month for the joint income of the caregiver and spouse).

Initially the CSG was only available for children younger than seven years. From 2003 it was gradually extended to older children up to the age of 14. Since January 2012, eligible children can receive the grant until they turn 18. Take-up of the CSG increased dramatically over the first 15 years, after which the numbers started levelling off. The slight dip in grant access in 2014 was probably the result of the introduction of a biometric system which led to the identification and suspension of grants to beneficiaries who were not verified biometrically. Most were reinstated the following year, although without backpay. From 2014, the numbers increased again gradually until 2021, then stabilised.

In March 2022, nearly 80,000 fewer CSGs were in payment than in March the previous year. Although the overall numbers picked up again subsequently, it is worrying that the number of infants (under one year of age) receiving the CSG has continued to fall each year, while at the same time poverty rates have risen. In March 2020, just before lockdown, 658,000 infants were receiving the CSG. This number dropped by over 100,000 to 550,000 in March 2021. The substantial drop between 2020 and 2021 was almost certainly the result of delays in birth registration and grant applications in the context of lockdown. Although birth registration rates recovered after 2021, the number of infants receiving the CSG continued to fall – to 543,000 in 2022 then to 509,000 in 2023 and to 469,000 in 2024 and 420,000 in 2025. This has reversed improvements in uptake by caregivers of infants by 10 years – taking us back to 2014 levels. It is not clear what is causing the further decline in CSG access for infants. Possible reasons may include staff shortages, the introduction of rotating days for grant applications and the impacts of load-shedding on the systems at SASSA offices. It is also possible that birth rates are falling faster than projected in the population models, but it is unlikely that they would be falling at a rate that could account for the sharp fall in the number of infants receiving the grant – a decrease of 36% when comparing 2025 grant payments for infants with the pre-lockdown figure for the same age group.

There is substantial evidence that social grants are being spent on food, education and basic goods and services. The

Figure 2c: Children receiving the Child Support Grant, 1998 – 2025



Sources: 1998 – 2007: National Treasury Intergovernmental Fiscal Reviews.
2008 – 2025: South African Social Security Agency SOCPEN monthly statistical reports.

Table 2a: Children receiving the Child Support Grant, by province and age group, 2025

Province	Number of child beneficiaries at end March 2025			
	0 – 5 years	6 – 11 years	12 – 17 years	TOTAL
Eastern Cape	594,451	654,641	679,908	1,929,000
Free State	216,354	236,099	248,737	701,190
Gauteng	614,251	719,799	701,540	2,035,590
KwaZulu-Natal	958,992	1,013,478	1,007,583	2,980,053
Limpopo	663,751	686,848	637,628	1,988,227
Mpumalanga	400,017	408,900	390,406	1,199,323
North West	296,189	313,146	308,181	917,516
Northern Cape	110,401	116,808	109,877	337,086
Western Cape	275,508	372,860	380,640	1,029,008
South Africa	4,129,914	4,522,579	4,464,500	13,116,993

Source: South African Social Security Agency (2025) *Twelfth Statistical Report 2024/25: Social Assistance.* Pretoria: SASSA.

evidence shows that the CSG not only helps to alleviate income poverty but is also associated with improved nutritional, health and education outcomes, especially if the grant is accessed soon after birth and received continuously.[10-19] Recent research among children with young mothers has also identified an association between CSG access and improved child cognitive development.[20]

Given the positive and cumulative effects of the grant, it is important that caregivers can access it for their children as early as possible. One of the main concerns is the slow take-up by caregivers of young children. An analysis found that exclusion rates for eligible infants were as high as 43% in 2014. The total rate of exclusion for all ages was estimated at 17.5% (more than 1.8 million children).[21] Infant exclusion rates dropped to 35% from 2017 to 2019, but increased again to 48% in 2020.[22] Exclusion rates are consistently found to be highest in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Barriers to take-up include confusion about eligibility requirements and the means test in particular; lack of documentation (mainly identity books or birth certificates, and proof of school enrolment, although the latter is not an eligibility requirement); and problems of institutional access (including the time and cost of reaching SASSA offices, long queues and lack of baby-friendly facilities).

Children receiving the Foster Child Grant

This indicator shows the number of children who are accessing the Foster Child Grant (FCG) in South Africa, as recorded in SASSA's administrative data.

The FCG is available to foster parents who have a child placed in their care by an order of the court. Foster care was designed for children who are placed with another family because they are in need of care and protection due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. Unlike the CSG, the FCG is not means-tested but is automatically paid to foster parents. The monthly value of the grant was R1 250 from April 2025.

The absence of a means test and the relatively large value of the grant compared to the CSG is justified on the basis that the child is a ward of the state because a court has placed them in alternative care, and the state is therefore directly responsible for ensuring that all the child's needs are provided for.

The number of children in foster care remained stable at around 50,000 nationally for many years when foster care was used primarily for children who were in need of care and protection or were awaiting adoption. However, from 2003, as HIV-related orphan rates rose sharply, the Department of Social Development and its social workers started encouraging family members to apply for foster care placements. They particularly encouraged grandmothers who were caring for orphaned children to apply for foster care placements because the value of the FCG was nearly three times that of the CSG.

Over the next decade, the FCG was increasingly used to provide poverty alleviation for orphaned children in kinship care. The appropriateness and effectiveness of this approach was questioned as far back as 2003, particularly because many children live with grandparents, aunts or other relatives anyway, whether or not their parents are alive. In 2022, for example, four million children – a fifth of the child population – did not live with either of their parents. Of these, 97% lived with relatives, mainly in households that included a grandparent. Less than one third were orphans. Nevertheless, with over half a million double orphans living with relatives, there were concerns that increasing demand for foster care placements would overwhelm the child protection system, which was not designed or resourced to process such large numbers of children.[23, 24]

By 2010, more than 500,000 FCGs were in payment, and the foster care system was struggling to keep pace with the numbers due to the strict checks and balances required by law. These included initial investigations and reports by social workers, newspaper adverts, court-ordered placements, and additional two-yearly social worker reviews and court-ordered extensions of placements. SASSA is not allowed to pay the FCG without a valid court order or extension order, and it stopped paying more than 110,000 FCGs between April 2009 and March 2011 because of backlogs in the extensions of court orders.[25-27]

In 2011, a High Court-ordered settlement stipulated that the foster care court orders that had expired – or that were going to expire in the following two years – must be deemed to have been extended until 8 June 2013. This effectively placed a moratorium on the lapsing of these FCGs. As a temporary solution, social workers could extend orders administratively (without having to go to court) until December 2014, by which date a comprehensive legal solution should have been found to prevent qualifying families from losing their grants in future.[28] No legal policy solution had been developed by the 2014 cut-off date. The Department of Social Development sought (and received) an urgent High Court order extending the date to the end of 2017, which was then extended until the end of November 2019, then to November 2020, then November 2022, and finally to November 2023.

Two laws needed to be amended to enable a comprehensive legal solution. This process took over a decade to be completed. An amendment to the Social Assistance Act was passed by Parliament in 2020 to provide for a new CSG Top-Up (instead of the FCG) for orphaned children living with relatives.

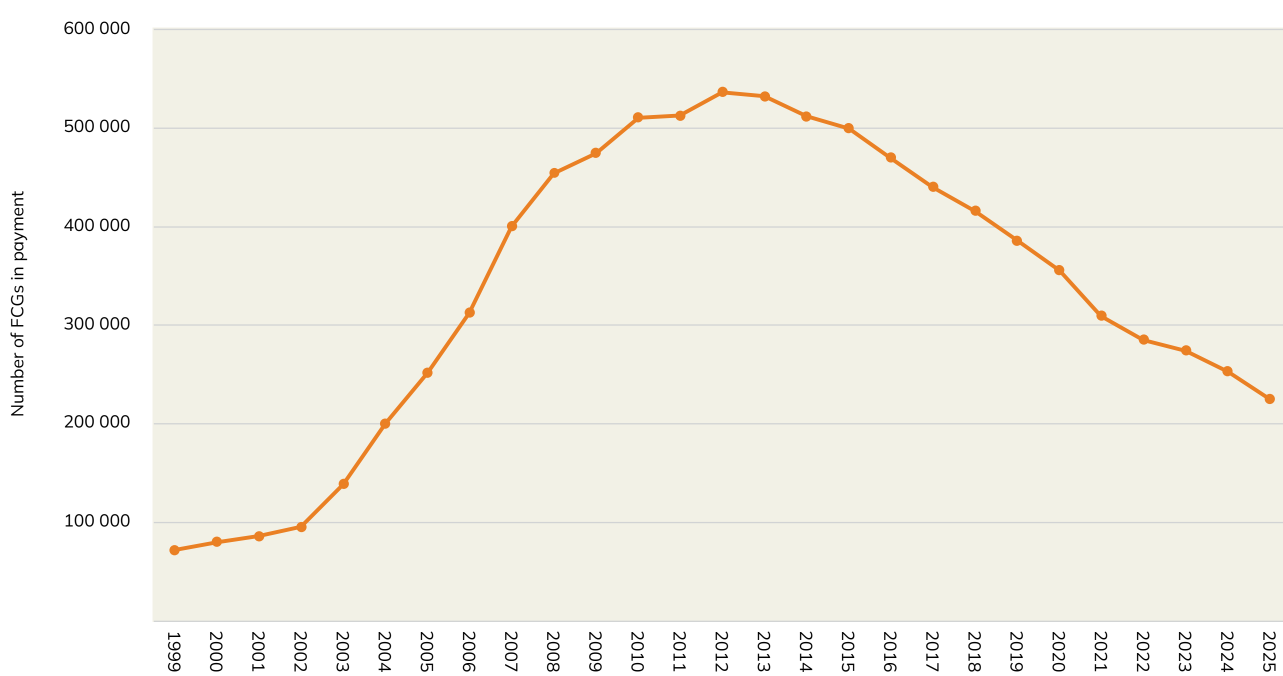
The CSG Top-Up is more easily accessible than the FCG because the caregiver can apply directly at SASSA without first having to go through a social worker investigation and court placement. It also gives access to a grant that, although lower than the FCG, is close to the food poverty line – enough to cover the basic food needs for a child. Importantly, it is not at risk of being stopped every two years. The CSG Top-Up is set at one-and-a-half times the value of the CSG, so that for example when the CSG is R500 per month, the CSG Top-Up is R750. Implementation of the top-up started in mid-2022. By March 2023 there were 37,000 children receiving the top-up, and by March 2025 the number had increased to nearly 90,000.[29] But the uptake of the CSG Top-Up has not been sufficient to offset the declining numbers of FCGs, and it is likely that many more orphans are excluded from these higher value grant amounts.

The Children's Act also needed to be amended to clarify that orphaned children in the care of relatives should be referred to the CSG Top-Up, and that only those who are in need of supervised care and protection should be placed in foster care. The Children's Amendment Bill was finally passed by Parliament and signed by the President at the end of 2022.[30] The Amendment Act came into effect a year later in December 2023. It clarifies that an orphaned child who is in the care of family members is not automatically in need of state care and protection, but like all other children, whether or not they live with their parents, they are entitled to care and protection services if needed.

This means that all new cases of orphans who are in the care of relatives can go directly to SASSA to apply for the CSG Top-Up and do not need to go via social workers or the courts to access an adequate grant. Orphans in the care of relatives who were already in foster care and receiving the FCG in December 2023 are exempted from the effect of this change and should remain on the FCG until they turn 18 (or 21 if still in education). The Amendment Act also devolves jurisdiction for guardianship orders to the children's courts (previously only accessible at the High Court) to make it easier for relatives caring for orphans to secure parental responsibilities and rights orders.

Since its height in 2012, when nearly 540,000 FCGs were paid each month, the number of FCGs has declined year-on-year. At the end of 2014, 300,000 court orders had expired, representing more than 60% of all foster care placements.[31] Those grants remained in payment only because the High Court order mentioned above prevented them from lapsing. In March 2025, 225,000 FCGs were paid to caregivers of children in foster care, a 58% reduction since 2012. The most dramatic drop has been in KwaZulu-Natal, where the number of FCGs fell by 74%, from 142,000 to 36,000. Over the same period, the number of children receiving FCGs fell by over 60% in the Free State, Mpumalanga and North West, and by 59% in the Eastern Cape. The Western Cape is the only province that has not experienced a drop in the number of FCGs, probably because it is also the only province where foster care is used mainly for its original purpose, rather than to supplement grant income for orphans living with relatives. Rural provinces have tended to bear the main burden of caring for orphans so, for example, many children who are orphaned in the Western Cape may be sent to live with relatives in Eastern Cape, and so are counted there.

Figure 2d: Children receiving the Foster Child Grant, 1999 – 2025



Sources: 1999 – 2007: National Treasury Intergovernmental Fiscal Reviews.
2008 – 2025: South African Social Security Agency monthly statistical reports.

Table 2b: Children receiving the Foster Child Grant, by province, 2012 & 2025

Province	2012	2025	Difference	% difference
Eastern Cape	116,826	47,650	-69,176	-59%
Free State	43,311	14,390	-28,921	-67%
Gauteng	56,451	30,562	-25,889	-46%
KwaZulu-Natal	142,114	36,457	-105,657	-74%
Limpopo	56,066	27,570	-28,496	-51%
Mpumalanga	32,886	11,923	-20,963	-64%
North West	45,634	17,426	-28,208	-62%
Northern Cape	14,456	7,574	-6,882	-48%
Western Cape	29,003	31,210	2,207	8%
South Africa	536,747	224,762	-311,985	-58%
FCG amount	R770	R1 250		

Source: South African Social Security Agency (2012; 2025) social grant statistics.

The rapid decline in the number of children in foster care over the past decade cannot be attributed only to the introduction of the comprehensive legal solution described above, as it was only partially in place by mid-2022 and fully in place from December 2023. Rather, declining numbers were due to lower rates of foster care placement and enrolment onto the grant, along with an increase in the numbers of grants terminating at the end of each year when children turn 18. This is because the beneficiaries of the FCG are still mainly orphans, who are typically older children.

In 2024, only 11% of FCGs reported in the General Household Survey (GHS) went to children who were not orphaned, while approximately 4% went to paternal orphans, 20% to maternal orphans and 65% to double orphans.[24] The GHS is not a reliable source of data on FCG uptake because the grant is under-reported in the survey (possibly because of confusion with the CSG). Nevertheless, the distributions indicate that the FCG is still mainly used for orphans. Another indicator is the number of FCGs that lapse at the end of the year when a child turns 18. It is often younger children who need to be placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect or because they are awaiting adoption, while older children are more likely to be in foster care because of orphaning. The share of FCGs lapsing at year end is mainly a reflection of children ageing out of the system. Back in the mid-2000s less than 10% of FCGs lapsed at the end of each year because children aged out of the system. But the share of FCGs lapsing continued to rise at each year end, reaching 20% in 2015 and still increasing to an all-time high of 29% at the end of 2024. Some (but not all) of the lapsed grants are reinstated the following year, as the FCG can continue until the dependant turns 21, if the family makes the effort to approach SASSA and prove that the child is still in school.

It is not possible to calculate a take-up rate for the FCG as there is no accurate record of how many children are eligible for placement in foster care because they are abused or neglected and in need of care and protection. Until the Children's Amendment Act was put into effect in December 2023, the majority of orphans in the care of relatives were legally eligible to be placed in foster care and receive the FCG,[i] but only a small portion of these children were accessing it.

The introduction of the CSG Top-Up in June 2022 has helped reverse this trend with 90,000 orphans accessing the CSG Top-Up by March 2025. More attention needs to be paid to promoting awareness about the availability of the CSG Top-Up among the public and government personnel at SASSA, the Department of Social Development, and the children's courts.

Children receiving the Care Dependency Grant

This indicator shows the number of children who are accessing the Care Dependency Grant (CDG) in South Africa, as recorded in the SOCPEN administrative data system of the SASSA.

The CDG is a non-contributory monthly cash transfer to caregivers of children with disabilities who require permanent care or support services. It excludes children who are cared for in state institutions because the purpose of the grant is to cover the additional costs (including opportunity costs) that parents or caregivers might incur due to the child's disability. The child needs to undergo a medical assessment to determine eligibility and the parent must pass an income or 'means' test.

Although the CDG targets children with disabilities, children with chronic illnesses are eligible for the grant once the illness becomes disabling, for example, children who are very sick with AIDS-related illnesses. Children with disabilities and chronic illnesses need substantial care and attention, and parents may need to stay at home or employ a caregiver to tend to the child. Children with health conditions may need medication, equipment or to attend hospital often. These extra costs can put strain on families that are already struggling to make ends meet. Poverty and chronic health conditions are therefore strongly related.

Table 2c: Children receiving the Care Dependency Grant, by province, 2012 & 2025

Province	2012	2025	Difference	% difference
Eastern Cape	18,235	25,869	7,634	42%
Free State	5,419	10,378	4,959	92%
Gauteng	14,170	25,147	10,977	77%
KwaZulu-Natal	34,969	42,735	7,766	22%
Limpopo	11,318	19,216	7,898	70%
Mpumalanga	7,950	13,205	5,255	66%
North West	8,736	11,563	2,827	32%
Northern Cape	4,236	6,419	2,183	52%
Western Cape	9,960	18,868	8,908	89%
South Africa	114,993	175,425	58,407	51%
CDG amount	R1 200	R2 310		

Source: South African Social Security Agency (2012; 2025) social grant statistics.

i In terms of section 150 (1)(a) of the Children's Act No 38 of 2005.

It is not possible to calculate a take-up rate for the CDG because there are no reliable data on the number of children with disabilities or chronic illness, who are in need of permanent care or support services. At the end of March 2025, there were 175,000 children receiving the CDG, and from the beginning of April 2025, the grant was valued at R2 310 per month.

The provincial distribution of CDGs is fairly consistent with the distribution of children. The provinces with the largest numbers of children – KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo – receive the largest share of CDGs. There has been a gradual but consistent increase in access to the CDG each year since 1998, when only 8,000 CDGs were disbursed.

References

1. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996.
2. Office of the High Commisioner for Human Rights. *Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25.* Geneva: United Nations. 1989.
3. Statistics South Africa. *National Poverty Lines. Statistical Release No. P0310.1.* Pretoria: Stats SA. 2018.
4. Hasell J, Rohenkohl B, Arriagada P. $3 a Day: A new poverty line has shifted the World Bank's data on extreme poverty. What changed, and why? OurWorldinData: 2025. Accessed: 11 September 2025. Available from: https://ourworldindata.org/new-international-poverty-line-3-dollars-per-day.
5. International Monetary Fund. *World Economic Outlook Database:* International Monetary Fund; 2022. Accessed: 10 September 2025. Available from: https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/April/download-entire-database.
6. Spaull N, Ardington C, Bassier I, Bhorat H, Bridgman G, Brophy T, . . . Zuze L. NIDS-CRAM *Synthesis Report Wave 1.* 2020. https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Spaull-et-al.-NIDS-CRAM-Wave-1-Synthesis-Report-Overview-and-Findings-1.pdf
7. Statistics South Africa. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 3, 2018. Statistical Release No. P0211.* Pretoria: Stats SA. 2018.
8. Statistics South Africa. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey Trends 2008-2020 Q4 (historical tables).* Pretoria: Stats SA. 2021. http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=72942
9. Statistics South Africa. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey Trends 2008-2020 Q4 (historical tables).* Pretoria: Stats SA. 2021. Calculations by K Hall, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=72942
10. Grinspun A. No small change: The multiple impacts of the Child Support Grant on child and adolescent well-being. In: Delany A, Jehoma S, Lake L, editors. *South African Child Gauge 2016.* Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town; 2016.
11. Coetzee M. *Do Poor Children Really Benefit from the Child Support Grant?* Econ3X3: 2014. Accessed: 10 September 2025. Available from: www.econ3x3.org/article/do-poor-children-really-benefit-child-support-grant.
12. Coetzee M. Finding the benefits: Estimating the impact of the South African Child Support Grant. *South African Journal of Economics.* 2013, 81(3):427-450
13. Department of Social Development, South African Social Security Agency, UNICEF. *The South African Child Support Grant Impact Assessment: Evidence from a survey of children, adolescents and their households.* Pretoria: UNICEF South Africa. 2012.
14. Woolard I, Leibbrandt M. *The Evolution and Impact of Unconditional Cash Transfers in South Africa.* Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town. 2010.
15. Agüero J, Carter M, Woolard I. *The Impact of Unconditional Cash Transfers on Nutrition: The South African Child Support Grant.* Working Paper 39. Brasilia: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth. 2007.
16. Samson M, Heinrich C, Williams M, Kaniki S, Muzondo T, Mac Quene K, van Niekerk I. *Quantitative Analysis of the Impact of the Child Support Grant.* Pretoria: Economic Policy Research Institute. 2008.
17. Budlender D, Woolard I. *The Impact of the South African Child Support and Old Age Grants on Children's Schooling and Work.* Geneva: International Labour Office. 2006.
18. Case A, Hosegood V, Lund F. The reach and impact of Child Support Grants: Evidence from KwaZulu-Natal. De*velopment Southern Africa.* 2005, 22(4):467-482
19. Samson M, Lee U, Ndlebe A, Mac Quene K, Van Niekerk I, Ghandi V, . . . Abrahams C. The Social and *Economic Impact of South Africa's Social Security System.* Cape Town: Economic Policy Research Institute and Department of Social Development. 2004.
20. Tathan C, Jochim J, Cluver L, Steventon-Roberts K, Marlow M, Wittesaele C, . . . Toska E. Grants and Development? Exploring the relationship between Child Support Grant access and child cognitive development in children of adolescent mothers in South Africa. *Social Security Review Volume 2: Social Security in the time of COVID-19.* Pretoria: Department of Social Development; 2024.
21. Department of Social Development, South African Social Security Agency, UNICEF. *Removing Barriers to Accessing Child Grants: Progress in reducing exclusion from South Africa's Child Support Grant.* Pretoria: UNICEF South Africa. 2016.
22. UNICEF and Joint SDG Fund. A*n Update Study on the Exclusion Error Rate for Children who are Eligible to Receive the Child Support Grant.* UNICEF and Joint SDG Fund. 2022.
23. Meintjes H, Budlender D, Giese S, Johnson L. *Children 'in Need of Care' or in Need of Cash? Questioning social security provisions for orphans in the context of the South African AIDS pandemic.* Cape Town: Children's Institute and Centre for Actuarial Research, University of Cape Town. 2003.
24. Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2022.* Pretoria: Stats SA. 2023. Analysis by K Hall, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.
25. Hall K, Proudlock P. *Orphaning and the Foster Child Grant: A return to the 'care or cash' debate.* Children Count brief. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. 2011.
26. Proudlock P. The Case of Child SS and 1.1 Million Others Like Him: Orphan children in need of social assistance. Towards Carnegie3: Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality Conference; 3-7 September 2012; University of Cape Town.
27. Skelton A. The Story of 110,000 Foster Child Grants that Stopped Being Paid in 2010/2011. Towards Carnegie3: Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality conference; 3-7 September 2012; University of Cape Town.
28. Centre for Child Law v Minister of Social Development and Others. SA: GNP; 2011.
29. South African Social Security Agency. *Eleventh Statistical Report 2023/24: Social Assistance.* Pretoria: SASSA. 2024.
30. Children's Amendment Act 17 of 2022.
31. Department of Social Development. *Annexure to urgent application to the High Court. In: Centre for Child Law v Minister of Social Development and Others. Unreported case 21726/110. December 2014.* 2014.