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Department:  
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**PSPPD**

PROGRAMME TO  
SUPPORT PRO-POOR  
POLICY DEVELOPMENT

# POLICY BRIEF SERIES

Child poverty (early childhood development, children and violence)



## Review of research evidence on child poverty in South Africa

### INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper summarises a review of research evidence on child poverty in South Africa. The review was initially undertaken in 2011, and was updated in 2017 to reflect more recent studies. It was commissioned by the Presidency's Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD). The review includes both quantitative and qualitative studies, but is limited to research that focuses specifically on child poverty.

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## SYNOPSIS

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Various methods are used to measure and quantify poverty, providing different estimates of poverty rates. However, all point to similar broad trends.

- **Income poverty rates are gradually declining in South Africa**, yet it is clear that a large share of children (and their households) continue to live in conditions of extreme deprivation. Nearly 12 million children are poor, when using an upper bound income poverty line that allows just enough for minimum adequate nutrition and other basic essentials.
- **Inequality has not been substantially reduced.**
- **Poverty rates are higher among children than among adults.**
- **Child poverty rates are highest in rural and former homeland areas.**
- **Child poverty remains highly racialised.**

A legacy of social, political and economic inequality continues to shape children's prospects. The broader household and community dynamics in which children experience poverty include vulnerability to shocks; labour migration and its effects on household formation and child care; adult unemployment and illness; the burden of financial and domestic responsibilities on women; reliance on social networks; and the inability of men to contribute materially and the absence of fathers in the lives of many children.

Children experience the effects of poverty in many ways: in physical hunger, in exclusion of various forms, in the time and effort of getting to places, in personal risk and anxiety about safety, in feelings of responsibility for income generation, in domestic responsibilities, and in feelings of humiliation.

Children draw particular attention to issues of safety – in the home, at school and in the neighbourhood. Many threats to safety are associated with factors that are in turn related in various ways to poverty: substance abuse, gangs and violence, the built environment, and the fact that poor children tend to inhabit public space. The challenge of safe places to play and socialise is highlighted, as are safe walking routes and public transport.

There is growing acknowledgement of the importance of taking children's views into account when considering pro-poor policies. Both adults and children understand education and employment to be important strategies to address intergenerational poverty, yet these are areas where they have little control over opportunities.





## SCOPE AND FRAMEWORK

The focus of the review is on studies that look specifically at child poverty, rather than more general poverty studies where child poverty has been examined as a subset. It is recognised, however, that child poverty is part of a broader poverty discourse which provides important context.

The review of quantitative studies of child poverty is limited to research where child poverty has been defined and measured, and studies are classified according to the following matrix:

Figure 1: Approaches to defining poverty

	RESEARCHER (‘expert’)	GENERAL POPULATION
INCOME (‘indirect’)	<div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 10px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">           Different thresholds of adequacy         </div>	
DEPRIVATION (‘direct’)		

Qualitative studies can expand and deepen our understanding of poverty, and can also be used to inform definitions of child poverty. Qualitative studies can be classified in various ways:

- Research on children specifically, versus more general research on neighbourhoods and households where children live.
- Research where children are participants, versus research which investigates child poverty from the perspective of others (e.g. caregivers).
- Research with an explicit poverty focus, versus research on specific or sectoral dimensions (e.g. health, education).

The qualitative part of the review is mainly limited to studies with an explicit child poverty focus and those where children were participants. Sector-specific studies were not included in the review, though these are often related to poverty in multiple and complex ways.

## CHILD POVERTY – SETTING THE CONTEXT

One of the features of poverty is vulnerability to shocks, which in turn contributes to chronic poverty. Descriptions of vulnerability are often linked to acute events or temporary states (such as theft, job loss, or sudden death). A feature of vulnerability is that it persists while the underlying threats remain. In an attempt to reduce vulnerability and risk, poor households develop multiple livelihood strategies. Such strategies can offer protection against shocks, but can also reduce the chances of escaping poverty.

A prominent theme in the poverty literature is the enduring nature and effect of the migrant labour system. Internal labour migration remains an important livelihood strategy for many families. This has significant consequences for children, including high rates of child mobility, disconnected or sequential relationships of care, and a large number of female-headed households, particularly in rural areas.

While extended family care is a long-established practice in South Africa, increased participation of women in the migrant labour force deepens the burden of child care on grandmothers and other relatives. The burden of support has been further exacerbated by the lack of employment for both the middle and younger generations, as well as the effects of HIV. Extended family networks and poor communities carry the cost of high unemployment and low wages.

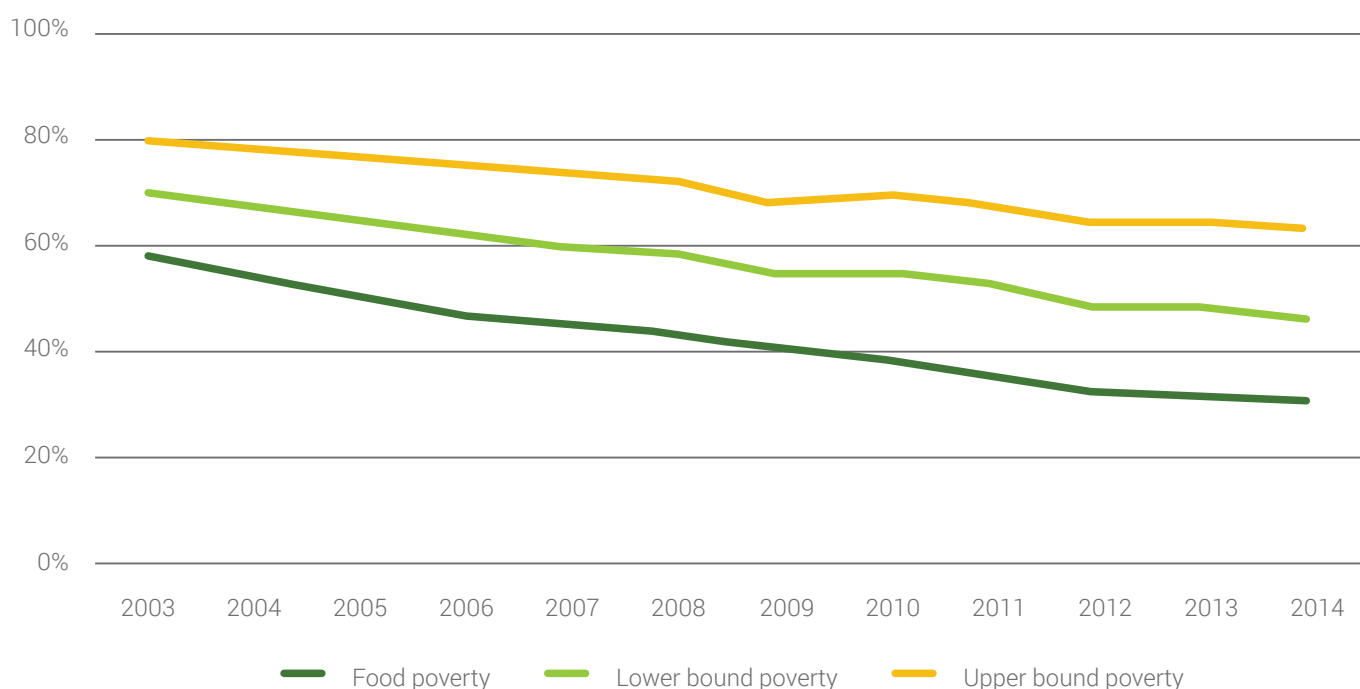
In the context of high unemployment, changing employment options and declining marriage and cohabitation rates, women increasingly have financial responsibility for supporting dependants – and in the absence of safe and affordable child care options, women may have to make difficult choices about how to prioritise child care and income generation.

## QUANTITATIVE STUDIES

### INCOME POVERTY STUDIES

There are many different ways of setting a poverty threshold to distinguish the poor from the non-poor. These methods can broadly be divided into two groups: those which relate to the distribution of income or expenditure (e.g. the poorest 40% of households), and those which represent the value of a basket of goods or services regarded as necessary (e.g. the money required to meet nutritional requirements and other basic needs).

Figure 2: Child poverty rates (2003 - 2014)



Source: General Household Survey, 2003-2014. Analysis by K Hall and W Sambu, Children's Institute (2016).

Various basket of goods poverty lines have been used to measure child poverty in South Africa. The most recent lines, which are now widely used, are the three proposed by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA):

- **Food poverty line** (R335 per person per month in 2011; allows just enough to prevent malnutrition but allows no expenditure on other essentials like clothing, shelter or transport)
- **Lower bound poverty line** (R501 per person per month in 2011; allows for some basic non-food costs but only if some nutrition is sacrificed)
- **Upper bound poverty line** (R779 per person per month in 2011; allows for minimum nutritional requirement and basic essentials).

The method for deriving these lines is similar to that previously used by Hoogeveen and Özler, whose poverty lines were widely used in South African poverty research. However, the Stats SA lines are substantially lower than the H & Ö lines. In other words, one has to be even poorer to qualify as "poor". Conversely, the international poverty line has been reviewed upwards. While the international poverty line for the Millennium Development Goals was \$1.25 per person per day, the poverty line for the Sustainable Development Goals is \$1.90 per person per day. The goal is that no person should live below this level of income.

Figure 2 shows the most recent trend analysis of child poverty rates in South Africa, using the Stats SA poverty lines. Results from studies using other poverty lines are given in the full review.

The results show high rates of child poverty, where 63% of children (11.7 million) are found to be poor using the upper bound poverty line and, even using the minimalist food poverty line, nearly a third of children are poor. Even though child poverty is found to be decreasing over time on all three measures, the decline has levelled off slightly in recent years.

Of course, a problem with any poverty threshold is that those just above it (who are classified as non-poor) are not necessarily better off than those just below it (the poor). Other methods of measuring poverty entail calculating the poverty depth, severity and share. These are also discussed in the full review.

## DEPRIVATION STUDIES

Another way of measuring poverty is to look directly at indicators of deprivation. The table below summarises the dimensions of deprivation included in various studies of child poverty in South Africa.

Deprivation studies can be divided into those that provide a set of stand-alone indicators of deprivation, and those where the indicators are grouped into some form of overall index to give a single number result.

Table 1: Dimensions of child deprivation in recent studies

Study	Income*	Material (assets)	Adult employment	Education	Care	Living environment**	Health / nutrition	Crime***	Communication	Protection
Children Count (2016 – recent) <a href="http://www.childrencount.ci.org.za">www.childrencount.ci.org.za</a>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Noble et al (2015) - SAIMDC 2015	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			
Statistics South Africa (2013)				✓		✓	✓		✓	
Bradshaw & Holmes (2010) – deprivation	✓	✓				✓			✓	
Bradshaw & Holmes (2010) – exclusion						✓		✓	✓	
Hall & Wright (2010)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				
SAHRC/UNICEF South Africa (2011)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
SAHRC/UNICEF South Africa (2014)	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓

\* Includes access to social grants as well as income poverty measures

\*\* Includes housing and access to services (sanitation, water, electricity)

\*\*\* Includes fear of crime as well as actual crime against children

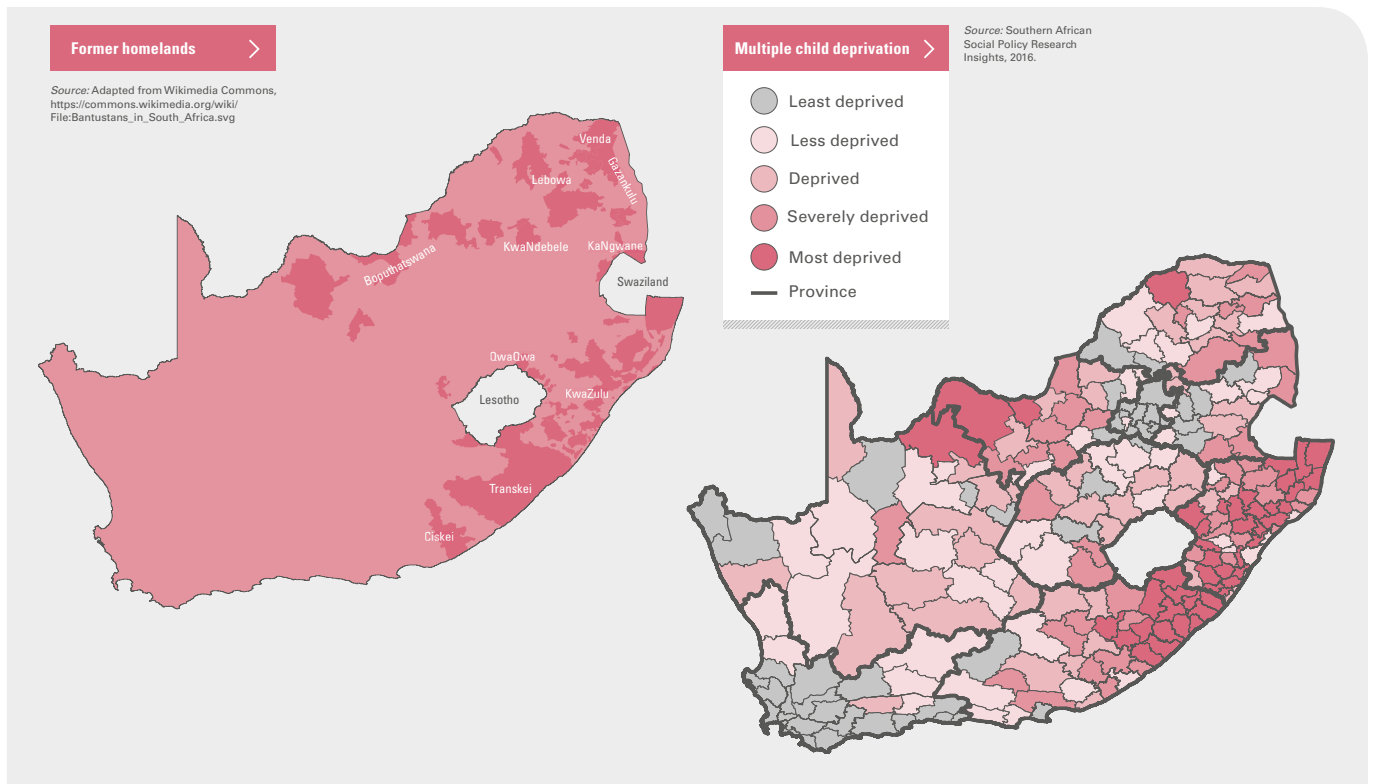
On the majority of measures, child poverty is most prevalent in rural and former homeland areas. An analysis of child poverty traps, using a Child Multidimensional Index (MPI) found that over half of children who are structurally poor live in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. The intersections between dimensions of deprivation can serve to reinforce poverty traps.

In addition to national and provincial profiles of multiple deprivation or multi-dimensional poverty, a number of studies have been undertaken to explore child deprivation at a small area level.

An analysis at local municipality-level, undertaken as part of the South African Index of Multiple Deprivation for Children (SAIMDC), reveals small areas of deprivation within otherwise affluent areas. For example, within metropolitan areas such as Cape Town or Johannesburg, the datazone index revealed pockets of deprivation in the townships, which are masked when looking at deprivation at higher levels of aggregation.

Figure 3 shows the SAIMDC at municipality level, using 2011 Census data (on the right). The map shows that, overall, the levels of relative deprivation are highest in the former homeland areas (the dark areas in the map on the left).

Figure 3: The spatial distribution of multiple child deprivation



Source: South African Human Rights Commission & UNICEF (2016).

In addition to presenting results at province or smaller area level, many of the income poverty and deprivation studies compare results for different age, sex and race groups. A selection of results is presented in the full review.

**Black African children have the highest levels of child poverty and deprivation.** Compared to a white child, a black African child has been found to be:

- 20 times more likely to experience hunger
- 23 times more likely to live in income poverty (upper bound poverty line)
- 8 times more likely to have no access to adequate water
- 29 times more likely to have no access to adequate sanitation
- 1.9 times more likely to lack exposure to early childhood development programmes
- 4.7 times more likely not to complete secondary education

Sources: SAHRC/UNICEF South Africa (2016) and Children Count.

### SOCIALLY PERCEIVED NECESSITIES

Most studies of poverty and deprivation use measures that are defined by researchers, but it is also possible to get a sense of the minimum requirements for children through consensus in the general population. Adult views on an acceptable standard of living for children are captured in the South African Social Attitudes Survey. The top five socially perceived necessities for children identified by adults are:

- Three meals a day
- Toiletries to be able to wash every day
- A visit to the doctor when ill and access to the required medicines
- All fees, uniform and equipment required for school
- Sufficient clothing to keep warm and dry

### POVERTY REDUCTION THROUGH THE CHILD SUPPORT GRANT (CSG)

The CSG reaches over 12 million children each month. While social grants are effective in reducing child poverty and hunger, 40% of children were found to be stuck in poverty traps between 2008 and 2012. Poverty traps are driven by adult unemployment, low levels of education, and low asset bases. While poor people have more income in the social grants era than before, the absence of assets still leaves them vulnerable. Qualitative research has shown that while social grants are invaluable to low income households, often providing the only regular source of income, the amounts are too low to bring households out of poverty and food insecurity remains a challenge.

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## QUALITATIVE STUDIES

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- Children experience poverty in a range of ways. They highlight threats to personal safety, both in the home and in the community. Whether or not children personally experience violence or abuse, anxiety about it is an important feature of childhood experience in the context of poverty.
- Basic needs identified by children include personal and household items, but also community resources as a great deal of time is spent outside the home. The recurrent mention of safe public spaces (including recreational places for children) has implications for settlement planning.
- The time and effort (and risk) for children to reach service delivery points such as health services and schools is an important facet of poverty experienced by children.
- Although most schools no longer charge fees, the associated costs of schooling (uniforms, books, stationery, and transport) are expensive, and are a source of concern for children.
- Despite the fact that children have little control over household income or expenditure, poor children are sometimes made to feel accountable for their poverty – for instance when schools humiliate or punish them for unpaid fees or not wearing the right uniform.
- Children are acutely aware of poverty, and of the cost of things. At its extreme, children's sense of responsibility to the household takes the form of voluntary decisions to undertake labour and generate income, even if this is illegal.
- Children understand the causes of poverty to be historically rooted, and perpetuated through poor education and poor employment opportunities. There is a strong belief that persisting at school and getting a good education will increase chances of employment and transition out of poverty.



## References

*This list of references relates to some of the quantitative studies reviewed. A full list of references is contained in the review.*

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To read the full report, please visit the PSPPD Poverty and Inequality Knowledge Repository at <http://psppdknowledgerepository.org/search/adsearch/download/34-rapid-evidence-reviews/456>

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