



SOCIAL AND FAMILY INFLUENCES TRAP MANY CHILDREN IN POVERTY

This is the third in a series of five policy briefs published by PAN: Children drawn from a study commissioned and funded by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) South Africa. The reports and policy briefs are available free of charge from the UNICEF and SAHRC websites: www.unicef.org/southafrica · www.sahrc.org.za and PAN Children – www.children.pan.org.

TITLES IN THE POVERTY TRAPS SERIES

Policy Brief 1: Education: Every child must read by age 9

Policy Brief 2: Poor childhood health can condemn children to poverty for life

Policy Brief 3: Social and family influences trap many children in poverty

Policy Brief 4: How geography can trap children in poverty

Policy Brief 5: How lack of assets affect child poverty and social exclusion

Despite progress in the policy and economic sphere since the political transition, many South African children are still caught in poverty traps and are socially excluded. Poverty traps occur where there are self-reinforcing mechanisms that cause poverty to persist. Poor children require an enabling environment in terms of health, education, assets, social and family networks, and geography to escape a poverty trap. Children caught in poverty are also potentially subject to social exclusion, the process that excludes them from full participation in society.

One manifestation of poverty traps is a high degree of chronic poverty. Recent data indicate that about 41% of South African children are chronically poor, while another 32% are in households that moved into and out of poverty between 2008 and 2012. Almost all chronically poor children are also in structural poverty. That means that their households have too few assets and productive potential to allow them to break out of poverty – a real poverty trap. Children caught in structural and chronic poverty are likely to become poor adults, whose children in turn will grow up poor, illustrating that the poverty trap has an intergenerational dimension. That also makes it more likely that such children will experience social exclusion.

The persistent nature of poverty traps means that the characteristics of the poor are slow to change. Today, as before the political transition, children caught in poverty traps are most likely to be black Africans, to live in rural areas of the former homelands, and to have poorly educated parents. Weak family structures also mean that they often do not live with both parents.

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INTRODUCTION

The social and family environment that children experience has a considerable influence on their life outcomes¹. A social or family environment that hampers skills and capabilities formation in early childhood shows its effect throughout the life cycle of an individual. Evidence indicates that early differences in cognitive and non-cognitive skills among individuals diverge further over time, thus emphasising the importance of early intervention². In South Africa, many children are still the victims of broken households or poor parenting, and experience social exclusion.

Household influences and poverty traps

The household that a child is born into dramatically affects his or her development and thus life outcomes. The general environment a child faces during the early-life years (up to age 8) is particularly important for developing skills and capabilities³ and is largely shaped by other members of the household (principally, the parents) as well as the broader community. This environment can provide either an enabling or disabling foundation for the child's development:

- An enabling environment is usually characterised by the presence of both parents in the household; adequacy in quantity and quality of nutrition; the ability and willingness of parents to undertake time and material investment in their children; an absence of violence and other aberrant behaviour which may bear deleterious long-term psychological effects; safety from harm (both physical and emotional); opportunities for learning; the application of non-violent discipline; and stimulating social interactions within the household as well as the broader social sphere.
- A disabling environment, in contrast, lacks at least some of these features and inhibits children from developing their full potential.

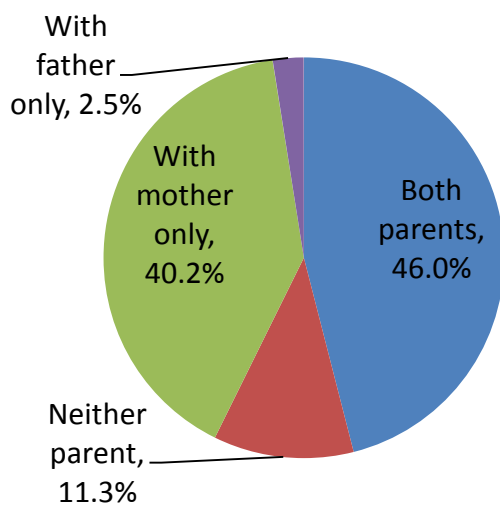


Figure 1: % of SA children aged 0-15 living with both, one or neither of their biological parents, 2011 (Source: Census 2011)

Poor households often present their children with a more disabling environment. It is therefore more likely that children born into poor households may not develop the necessary socio-emotional and cognitive skills for success in later life. Poverty serves as a significant risk factor for inhibiting early development⁴. Parents can influence their children through active investment in their postnatal development⁵, which is important for their cognitive capabilities, while the quality of parenting and household structure influence the 'soft skills' (non-cognitive skills) such as motivation, self-control and self-confidence that are also important for later success in life, including in the labour market⁶.

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Family structure has an important bearing on child poverty. The extended family system that is common in many black African communities offers some important strengths, but has been decimated by the ravages of the migrant labour system that evolved earlier in South Africa's history. Today, a minority of South African children live with both biological parents. Only 46% of children live with both parents, and this figure is much lower in poorer provinces and for older children. Less than half of children also live in the same household as their biological father. A full 11% – one in every nine children – do not live with either biological parent. Economic factors such as migration in search of jobs still play a strong role in household structures, as do the fact that parents of young children often do not marry or cohabit where the father is unemployed.

Thus a large proportion of children grow up in female-headed households where there often is no adult male present in the household. Such households are more likely to be poor, with consequences for children in such families. In 2007, just over 50% of children lived in female-headed households, with households which are poorest most likely to be headed by females within each province. Figure 2 shows the percentage of children per province living in female-headed households in 2007 in the richest and poorest quintile of the population in each province. For the country as a whole, 64% of children in the poorest quintile lived in female-headed households, compared to a still high 24% in the richest quintile of households. There are distinct regional differences: even when one only considers South Africa's richest 20% of households, the poorer provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo have the highest rates of female-headed households. Patterns across provinces are similar to what they were in 2001. At a municipal level too, municipalities with more female-headed households tend also to have higher child poverty rates.

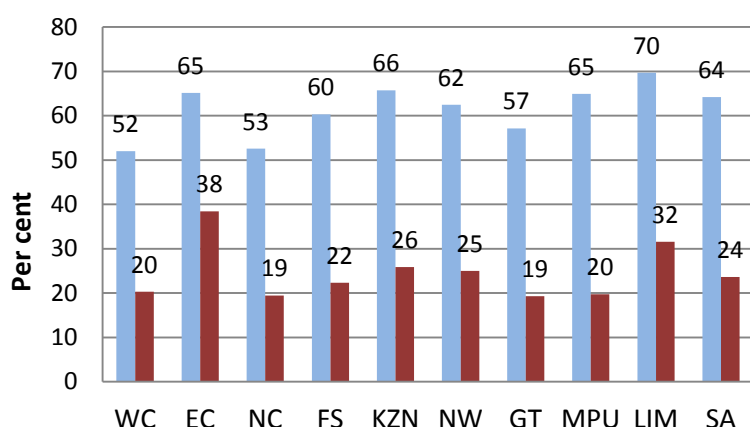


Figure 2: Percentage of children living in female-headed households by province in 2007 (Community Survey)

Differences in job and earning prospects between regions encourage younger, more educated adults to migrate to more affluent regions with better labour market conditions, leaving a highly skewed population age structure in the sending region. Often, those who migrate are young adults, with males more likely to do so than females, and their children usually do not accompany them. This contributes to the large differences between provinces in the proportion of children who live in female-headed households.

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SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND POVERTY

Like the environment within the household, connectedness with the broader society also has a bearing on an individual's life outcomes. A strong social network fosters greater opportunities for labour market access, sharing of certain duties such as childcare, information diffusion and assimilation, and protection against shocks to resources through lending and borrowing. Various social networks develop through the interaction of individuals and groups. When social networks within a society are fractured, this may perpetuate poverty among particular groups. According to Nobel laureate Amartya Sen⁷, 'social exclusion' and the consequent marginalisation from society is itself a form of poverty – in addition to causing further deprivation. Experiencing a sense of social connectedness and a feeling of 'belonging' is important for the healthy socio-emotional development of children. Children living in poor circumstances are often exposed to community violence, with deleterious consequences for their long-term development. Some consequences include post-traumatic stress disorder, 'externalising problems', accepting violence as appropriate behaviour, anxiety, depression, dissociation and a greater proclivity for substance abuse in later life as outcomes of childhood trauma. In communities where violence is pervasive a "communal sense of insecurity" may develop and foster a general sense of helplessness⁸. Such an environment is antithetical to the enabling conditions required for the realization of children's developmental potential. PTSD is also more prevalent among children whose parents suffered childhood trauma. This is especially evident in cases of child abuse and neglect. Victims of child maltreatment are significantly more likely to engage in criminal activity than non-victims and likely to have lower educational attainment and earnings in the labour market. Abuse thus lowers the life chances of children, harming their socio-emotional and cognitive development and thereby reducing their earning prospects in the labour market.

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Social exclusion

“An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives”. (Burchadt, Le Grand and Piachaud (2002: 30). Such key activities could relate to formal institutions (state provision of goods and services) or informal institutions and societal norms (like racial, ethnic or other forms of discrimination), as well as mechanisms relating to constraints on individual choice. ‘Key activities’ usually include material amenities like housing and basic goods, non-material factors like relationships, self-respect, recognition and psychological wellbeing, civic participation and political voice, as well as economic participation, especially in the labour market.

Social exclusion means feeling disconnected from broader society and manifests as non-participation in various activities, including types of consumption, recreation and leisure activities, and social or cultural events. Developing social relations requires both time and money. Poor parents are less able to support the activities their children may need to engage in to sustain desired friendships and other relations. Also, single parents who have multiple duties (work and in the home) may not be able to adequately engage their children at home. Children who experience social exclusion display low aspirations and expectations, which are in turn yet another mechanism for perpetuating poverty. Social exclusion is a relative term within any society and there is no universal set of activities and social functions against which to measure whether someone is ‘excluded’. But the concept is still relevant to discussions on persistent poverty. It helps to explain patterns of poverty, for individuals, households or communities that belong to some distinct group. Such a group may be different in terms of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity or nationality, spatial location, political affiliation, or religion, where this distinction forms the basis for exclusion from various activities that may otherwise advance their wellbeing. Social exclusion furthermore explains the *entrapment* in poverty of many born into poverty. A socially excluded individual finds it difficult to engage in certain activities such as getting a good job, and often receives lower wages than others. In this way ‘exclusion traps’ fundamentally violate equality of opportunity through practices of marginalisation.

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE FAMILY

Central to many of the problems relating to child poverty are weak social structures and associated problems of violence and abuse. The important role of social networks and of parenting is well established, but in policy terms, these are not areas where there are clear policy instruments.

In the case of absent fathers, it is important to consider initiatives that can challenge social norms. Action in regard to child maintenance payments may be a start, but is unlikely to have the desired effect if it focuses mainly on payments and does not have a more encompassing message. Failure to pay maintenance is merely a symptom of a larger malady.

The high prevalence of child maltreatment in South Africa – which is more widespread in poorer communities⁹ – is also symptomatic of parents neglecting their responsibility to ensure a safe and enriching environment for the development of their children’s social and cognitive skills. Child protection laws and services (which largely emphasise protection rather than prevention) are aimed at enforcing accountability. A Human Sciences Research Council survey of various public administrators and academics also reflected a disturbing view of the South African public’s attitude to child maltreatment). In answer to the question, ‘How seriously does the general public perceive child maltreatment?’, only 42% of respondents answered that it is generally viewed as serious. Even more serious, 51% of respondents believed that the general public perceived child maltreatment as ‘usually not preventable’.¹⁰

The Children’s Act of 2005 that came into force in 2010 is an institutional response to the urgent need to deal with the problem of the maltreatment of children. Converting it into practice requires various instruments, including social welfare services. It is therefore imperative that there should be greater attention paid to the provision of such welfare services, especially in poor regions and townships.

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A policy recommendation that has been made in this regard is that a conditional grant should be paid to provinces for funding a minimum number of social workers or auxiliary workers, both in their own employ and in private welfare organisations subsidised by provinces. Such workers should also work with communities to help prevent rather than simply treat the consequences of weak parenting and abuse of children. It would be possible for the national government to specify, for instance, that a certain minimum number of social workers should be subsidised in particular districts, based on the factors such as the population that needs to be served.

CONCLUSION

It is very difficult for poor children to escape a weak family environment or social exclusion, two phenomena that many poor children face. Thus society needs to put in great efforts to overcome these circumstances. Otherwise, those children are likely to remain caught in a poverty trap that will constrain them from developing their potential, thereby also affecting their children in turn.

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SOCIAL AND FAMILY INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN

DISABLING FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION CAN RETARD CHILDREN'S HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT AND HAVE LONG-LASTING CONSEQUENCES FOR THEIR LIFE CHANCES

- An enabling home environment usually includes the presence of both parents in the household; adequate nutrition; time and resources invested in children; absence of violence, non-violent discipline and safety from physical and emotional harm; opportunities for learning; and stimulating social interactions.
- Fewer than half of South African children live with both their parents; many children grow up in households where there is no adult male present.
- Poor children more often experience maltreatment, which is widespread in South Africa.
- Child protection laws, by themselves, cannot improve the situation. Supportive public attitudes and more social workers are also required, especially in currently underserved poor and rural communities.

The South African Human Rights Commission Report:

Poverty traps and social exclusion among children in South Africa

<http://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/Poverty%20Traps%20Report.pdf>

<http://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/Poverty%20Traps%20Report%20Summary.pdf>

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