



Youth: An opportunity to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty

The South African Child Gauge

The *South African Child Gauge* is the only publication to track the status of South Africa's children on an annual basis. It aims to make the latest research evidence accessible to policy-makers and practitioners and to contribute to more effective policy design and implementation for children.

It includes an overview of the latest legislative developments, child-centred indicators, and a collection of short essays by experts in the field.

South African Child Gauge® 2015

The 2015 countrywide closure of universities in response to the #FeesMustFall protests have placed the need for access to high-quality education for all – and the necessity to deal with the continuously high levels of inequality and poverty – at the forefront of the political agenda. They have also positioned young people as a powerful constituency whose voice needs to be heard and taken seriously.

More than 23 years after the end of apartheid, the “born free” generation has come of age, and it is clear that political freedom has not translated into economic opportunities for all. More than half of young people in South Africa still live in income poverty, and racial, class and gender inequalities continue to limit their choices and chances for upward social mobility.¹

High levels of school drop-out and youth unemployment have led many analysts to refer to South Africa's youth as a “lost generation” or “ticking time bomb” that needs to be diffused. Yet youth is a time of tremendous growth and potential. It is therefore vital to invest in this critical stage of development: a failure to act will compromise not only the prospects of this generation of young people, but also of their children.²

The National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020,³ adopted by Cabinet in May 2015, recognises these challenges and calls for an intersectoral approach to address structural barriers and unlock real change for young people. Yet these proposals will remain empty promises in the absence of a concrete implementation plan and urgently need to be taken forward through the proposed Integrated Youth Development Strategy.

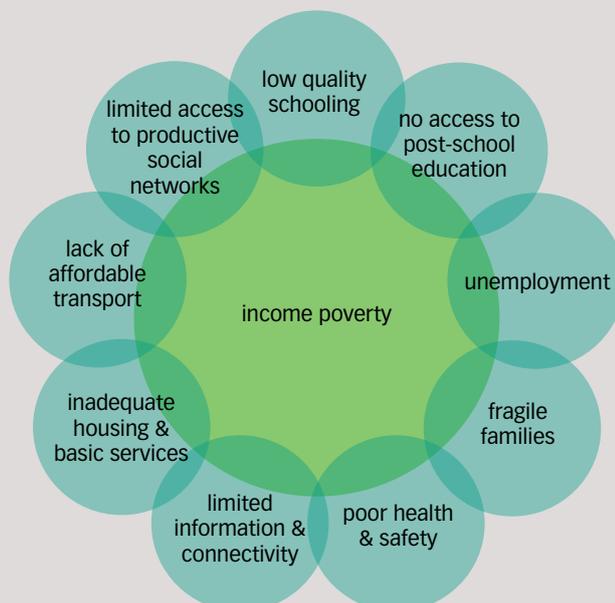
This policy brief draws on research evidence presented in the *South African Child Gauge 2015*⁴ and highlights the complex challenges facing young people in South Africa. It identifies a number of cross-cutting strategies that have the potential to improve outcomes for today's youth and to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Youth are disproportionately affected by poverty

Almost six out of 10 young people (59%) live in households with a per capita monthly income of less than R620 [the “upper-bound poverty line”] compared to 43% of the adult population.⁵ Youth poverty levels remain strikingly similar to those of their parents' generation, suggesting that post-apartheid policies have not yet levelled the playing field. Income poverty continues to be strongly associated with race: 65% of African youth live below the poverty line, compared to just over 4% of White young people.⁶

YOUTH
59% of youth live in poverty

Spatial inequalities persist with young people in the former homeland areas continuing to experience the highest levels of deprivation.



Many young people experience **multiple forms of deprivation** simultaneously including low levels of education, poor health and limited access to housing, basic services and economic opportunities.⁷ These vulnerabilities are inter-related: for example, income poverty can compromise children's health, which, in turn, impacts on education and employment prospects. In addition, poor youth don't have access to the kinds of information and social networks (or the cultural and social capital) needed to access further education and employment. If left unchecked, this situation is likely to continue to drive the intergenerational transmission of poverty and also compromise the well-being of the next generation of children.

Understanding these multiple dimensions of poverty and how they interact is therefore crucial in developing **comprehensive policies** that can support today's youth as they strive to break the vicious cycles of poverty.

Figure 1: Multiple dimensions of deprivation intersect and reinforce one another.

Key challenges and opportunities for intervention

The South African Child Gauge 2015 highlights a number of cross-cutting strategies that have the potential to improve outcomes for today's youth and disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty. More research is needed to evaluate effectiveness, exploit potential synergies, inform practical implementation and then take interventions to scale.

Schools

Access to education has improved significantly in the post-apartheid period, but this has not resulted in increased employment. The poor quality of education offered in the majority of South Africa's public schools acts as a poverty trap. Poorer children in those schools very quickly fall behind in their learning, and learning backlogs and grade repetition remain key drivers of school drop-out at a later age: of the approximately one million learners who started grade 1 in 2003, only 49% made it to matric in 2014, 37% passed and 14% qualified for university entrance.⁸ It is therefore a national imperative to:

- **Improve the quality of teaching and learning for all.** This includes increasing teachers' content knowledge and teaching skill – starting in the foundation phase.
- Find ways to **remediate the learning backlogs** in high school so that the current cohort of learners in high school are supported to write and pass their matric exam and find access to higher education.

Post-school education

A college or university qualification increases young people's employment chances and earning potential; yet only 8% of youth aged 18 – 24 attend college or university.⁹ Many high school students don't have access to the information they need to make informed decisions about matric subjects or later career paths. Pathways to post-school education and employment are often unclear. Each college and university has its own application requirements, making it difficult and costly for students to apply to more than one institution.

In addition, tuition costs are high – in the range of R24,000 for college,¹⁰ and as high as R65,000 for first-year studies at university¹¹. Those who do manage to secure a place in an institute of higher learning are faced with a range of expenses and an institutional culture that may push them back out of the system. These challenges highlight the need to:

- Provide clear and comprehensive **career guidance** early in high school to guide subject choices and highlight post-school learning pathways.
- Provide **widely accessible, clear and efficient information, guidance and support** to make it easier for students to apply to colleges and universities.
- Provide **comprehensive support** – including financial aid, academic and psychosocial support – and an inclusive institutional culture to enable students to stay the course until graduation.
- Invest in the college sector to **expand access to technical and vocational education and training** and strengthen links between colleges and employers to ensure education and training lead to employment.

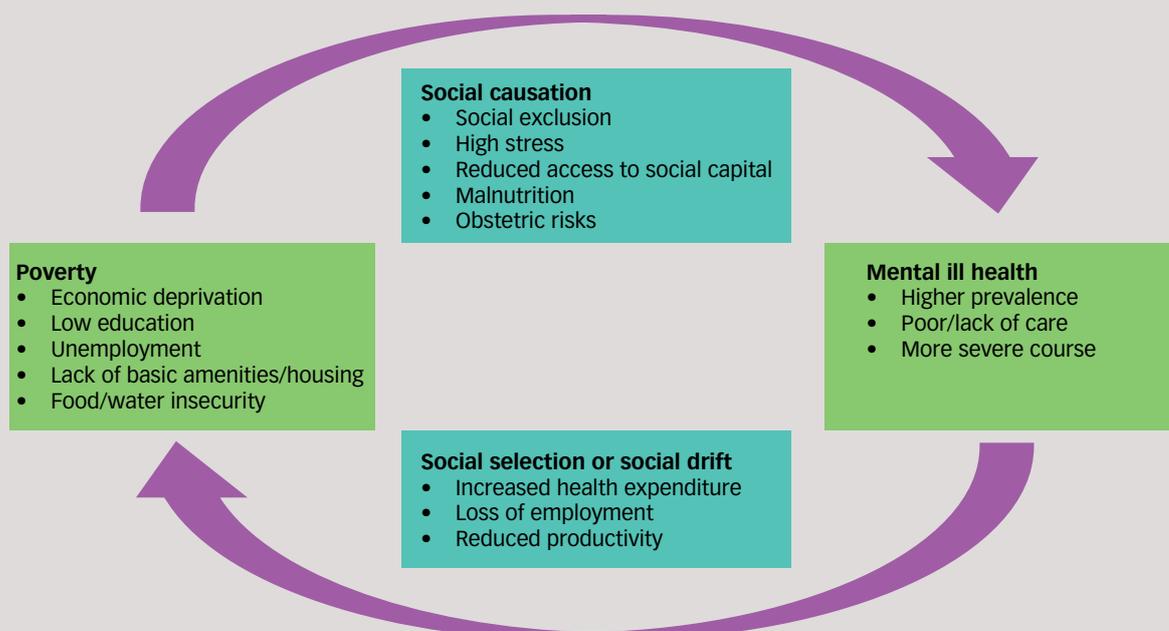
Employment

The official unemployment rate for youth aged 15 – 34 rose from 33% in 2008 to 37% in 2015 – and this rate increases to 45% if discouraged work-seekers are included.¹² The low educational outcomes and the structure of the labour market are key drivers of youth unemployment as the demand for labour is highest for skilled and experienced employees (with a post-school qualification). Unemployment is highest for youth without a matric (55%) and lowest for those with a tertiary qualification (8%).¹³

In addition, a lack of information and of "productive social capital", coupled with the often long distances between youth's living areas and jobs, and significant transport costs, make it particularly difficult for young people in poor households to navigate entry into the labour market.¹⁴ As a result, young people are often faced with long periods of unsuccessful job search and joblessness and run the risk of becoming depressed, discouraged and chronically unemployed. Major changes can only be expected once the labour market is able to produce more jobs and absorb more unskilled labour, or the education system produces job-seekers with the required skills. In the interim it is important to:

- **Make young people more employable** through skills programmes and learnerships.
- Motivate employers to **increase their demand for youth employees**.
- Explore how the social grant system, travel vouchers, saving schemes and better access to clear information can **help young people access jobs**.
- **Create more jobs** that suit the skills levels of young people.

Figure 2: A vicious cycle of poverty and mental ill health



Source: Lund C, de Silva M, Plagerson S, Cooper S, Chisholm D, Das J, Knapp M & Patel V (2012) *Poverty and Mental Disorders: Breaking the Cycle in Low-income and Middle-income Countries*. Prime Policy Brief 1. Cape Town: Programme for Improving Mental Health Care, UCT.

Health

Improving the health of adolescents and youth is crucial for their current well-being and future economic productivity, as adolescent behaviours and health are key predictors of the *adult* burden of disease. Leading causes of death among youth include violence, injuries, TB and HIV.¹⁵ In addition, poverty is associated with experiences of social exclusion, heightened stress, violence and trauma which may increase risk and severity of mental illness and substance misuse, and compromise access to care.¹⁶ Yet these connections remain badly understood in the South African context. It is vital to:

- Adopt an **integrated approach** to the design of prevention and treatment programmes that addresses the links between poverty, mental health and risk behaviour.
- Monitor implementation of **youth-friendly clinics** and the Integrated School Health Policy to ensure welcoming, confidential, quality and easy-to-access health care services.

Parenting and family care

Children who have received appropriate nutrition, cognitive stimulation and warm, positive parenting with consistent limit-setting are more likely to be healthy and to succeed in education, and less likely to engage in risk behaviour.¹⁷ But poverty can make parenting a particularly difficult task and increases the risk of harsh and inconsistent parenting. This has a negative effect on young people's ability to perform well at school and find employment.

Parenting support is therefore critical and needs to also recognise the new challenges that arise as children become adolescents and young people start to expand their social networks. Special attention should also be given to teen parents. While teen child-bearing has declined in South Africa, it is likely to compromise the educational outcomes of both parents and child.¹⁸ Key recommendations are to:

- Increase investment in **parenting programmes** targeted at teen parents and parents of adolescents and slightly older youth.
- Prioritise **support for teen parents** including early antenatal care, social assistance, parenting programmes and child care services so teen mothers can complete their education.

Mobility and migration

Mobility and migration increase sharply amongst youth in their late teens and peak in their early 20s.¹⁹ While young people leave rural areas in search of better education, employment and income-generating opportunities, moving is not always associated with improved well-being and many may face a precarious existence in the informal settlements on the outskirts of the cities. Key recommendations are to:

- Develop **"youth-friendly cities"** with easy, affordable transport, improved access to information to enable access to education and employment opportunities, an appropriate range of rental or social housing and safe public spaces for recreation.

Overarching recommendations for policy and practice

It is important to consider the introduction of a **comprehensive social security programme** to help alleviate the burden on a younger generation struggling through education and disconnected from the labour market in order to increase their chances of breaking poverty traps for themselves and their children. Delivering quality education for all, preventing school drop-out, enabling access to higher education, training and the labour market, understanding and alleviating the heavy burden of disease among young people, and supporting their sense of belonging and citizenship in the broader South African context – are all areas that need to be addressed. In addition, it is imperative that the structural support and coordinating mechanisms recognise and build on young people's agency and aspirations.

1. Take youth seriously

Those who hold political power must in the first instance take youth and their aspirations for a better life seriously. Youth should be included as legitimate stakeholders with equal voice. This requires a focused, developmental approach which recognises and deliberately fosters **youth agency**. It includes actively seeking out young people's views to inform and enhance the design and delivery of policies, programmes and services. It is also necessary to provide young people with the tools that would enable them to activate their citizenship, to participate in democratic communities, and to think critically and act deliberately.

2. Provide bridging relationships and structural support

Many young people lack the information and social networks they need to make informed choices and to access opportunities. Creating appropriate **bridging relationships and structural support** is therefore essential to enable youth to access resources, negotiate adverse environments, navigate the systems, and achieve the best possible outcomes. This includes improving the provision of basic services such as quality education and health care for all, increasing the levels of youth employment, and providing clear and comprehensive study and career guidance, financial support, parenting support and youth-focused skills development programmes.

3. Develop effective policies, programmes and services

The National Youth Policy promotes a comprehensive approach to youth development in order to address a range of structural barriers and unlock real change for young people. Yet these proposals will remain empty promises in the absence of a concrete implementation plan. Such a plan should incorporate cross-cutting strategies that address the ways in which the multiple dimensions of poverty intersect and constrain young people's lives. It should also build on a strong evidence base: there is an urgent need to identify, evaluate and scale up best practices.

4. Provide strong leadership and coordination

Post-apartheid policies have adopted a fragmented approach to youth development and the proliferation of agencies and youth desks at local, provincial and national government levels has hindered effective coordination and accountability. The establishment of a central coordinating body with the authority to steer implementation and hold other departments accountable is essential, as is the role of a dedicated parliamentary portfolio committee to provide for oversight and accountability.

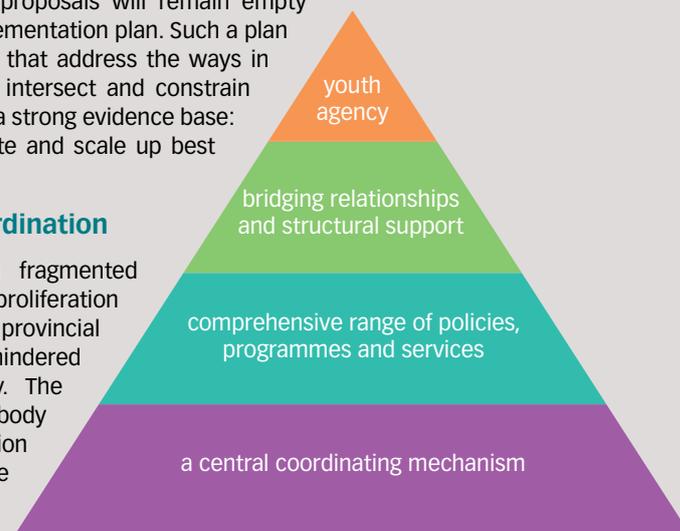


Figure 3: Four critical levers for youth development

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It draws directly on the work of various authors who contributed to the *Child Gauge 2015*, and the full set of essays and statistical tables are available at: www.ci.org.za.

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Endnotes

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