

POVERTY & EDUCATION

POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Poverty is one of the biggest problems facing South Africa. Researchers and government departments do not agree about how many South Africans are poor. Some say the number is close to 50%, others say it is well over that. Official statistics say that in 2007, 47% of South Africans were living below the **poverty line**. Even though people disagree about the exact number, we can all agree that too many people in South Africa are living in unacceptable conditions.

There are many reasons behind the high poverty levels in South Africa, and one of them is the high unemployment rate. The latest official statistics say that 25.7% of South Africans who should be working are unemployed. This percentage does not include people who are employed but do not earn enough to fully support their families. At the moment, 2.4 million young people in South Africa between the ages of 18 and 25 are unemployed.

Poverty Line: The poverty line is a way to measure the number of people in the country living in poverty. There are different ways to determine the poverty line. One way is by looking at the price of basic goods. If a household does not have money to afford basic goods, we say they are living below the poverty line. For example, in 2005/6, if you and the people you live with did not have R322 a month for basic expenses, you would be living below the poverty line



Although the country is no longer **segregated** according to race, the effects of apartheid's race-based systems remain. Most of the poor people in the country are not white, and most of middle and upper class people are. This means that the effects of poverty are felt by particular race groups, especially black people.

Segregated: Separated; kept apart

Households that are headed by women are twice as likely to be poor than male-headed households. Poverty is also more widespread in rural areas. **Can you think of reasons why female-headed households and households in rural areas are more likely to be poor?**



**2.4 MILLION YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOUTH AFRICA
BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18 AND 25 ARE UNEMPLOYED**

CHILDREN & POVERTY

- Different studies do not give the same number, but it is estimated that between 58% and 75% of South African children live below the poverty line. This means that more than half of children in South Africa live in poverty!
- 10% of black children in South Africa show signs of **malnutrition**.
- The most common illness among South African children that can be connected to poverty is stunting. Stunting is when a child's height and weight is less than what it is supposed to be for his or her age. It is usually caused by malnutrition. In South Africa, 25% of black children (or 1 out of 4) show signs of stunting.

Malnutrition: A person suffers from malnutrition when his or her body does not get the right amount of calories, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients it needs to be healthy. This can be because the person is not eating enough food, such as a person suffering from hunger, or not eating enough of the right kinds of foods.

Can you think of other ways in which children are affected by poverty?

POVERTY & INEQUALITY

South Africa does not only have high levels of poverty but also high levels of inequality. This means that there is extreme wealth on the one hand and extreme poverty on the other. We see this clearly in the Cape Town area. In fact, South Africa is the most unequal society in the world. This inequality can also be seen in our education system, which is the topic of the fact sheet 'Unequal Schools, Unequal Outcomes'.

POVERTY & SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

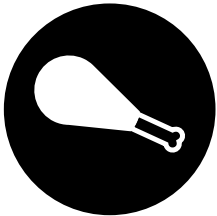
If one looks at various tests, middle-class learners normally perform better than learners attending schools in poorer communities.

This does not mean that learners from working-class families cannot, or do not, perform well in school. There are learners who perform very well (in the same way that some learners from middle-class backgrounds perform poorly). Of course, this also does not mean that learners from poor communities have less potential than learners from middle-class communities, or that they are less intelligent! They are just as bright and ambitious as learners from middle-class communities. **But the education system has been failing them and they have to overcome many more obstacles in order to succeed.**

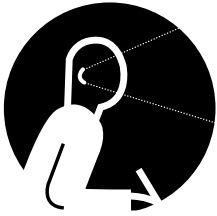
“THEY [LEARNERS] COME WITHOUT FOOD AND THEY EAT HERE AT SCHOOL... SOMETIMES THEY COME INADEQUATELY DRESSED, WITHOUT A JERSEY OR SHOES AND IT’S COLD AND IT’S A LEARNER WHO DOES NOT HAVE A HOME. WHEN A CHILD IS SHIVERING, HE DOESN’T LEARN WELL. THAT’S THE REASON HE HAS A DIFFICULTY. HE WON’T LISTEN TO YOU OR CONCENTRATE ON WHAT YOU DO BECAUSE OF HUNGER AND COLD THAT HE’S FEELING.”

- A teacher interviewed by the Nelson Mandela Foundation’s study on rural education

Brahm Fleisch, an education specialist, writes that there are many and complicated ways in which poverty may lead to poor performance in school. For example:



Children who are hungry have trouble concentrating in school.



Poverty affects health of children, which can have an effect on their performance in school. For example, poor children are more likely to suffer from ear infections that go untreated. This can lead to difficulties in hearing, which can have negative effects on school performance. **Can you think of reasons why?**



The HIV/Aids pandemic has had a massive impact on the education system, and especially on learners from poor backgrounds. Just one example: thousands of children have lost their parents due to HIV/Aids. As a result, many children now have more responsibilities at home (such as looking after younger brothers and sisters). This can lead to late-coming or not even showing up.



Children from working-class backgrounds often come from homes where there are no or few books. These homes do not have a 'culture of reading.'

Can you think of other ways in which poverty can lead to poor performance in schools?

POOR QUALITY EDUCATION AS A POVERTY TRAP

This year, a group of researchers from the University of Stellenbosch wrote a report showing how poor quality education traps poor people in poverty. Their research found that South Africa's education system mostly helps poverty and inequality to survive rather breaking them down.

In his book *Long Walk to Freedom*, former-President Nelson Mandela writes:

“ EDUCATION IS THE GREAT ENGINE OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT. IT IS THROUGH EDUCATION THAT THE DAUGHTER OF A PEASANT CAN BECOME A DOCTOR, THAT THE SON OF A MINERWORKER CAN BECOME THE HEAD OF THE MINE, THAT A CHILD OF FARMWORKERS CAN BECOME THE PRESIDENT. ”

Do you think that most learners in working-class communities are receiving the kind of education that prepares them to be doctors, mine managers or presidents?

The quality of education a learner receives has an effect on his or her chances in life. In other words, if a learner receives a good quality education, the chances are better that he or she will find a good, decent-paying job one day.

Through good education, people are able to escape poverty. But the fact is that most poor people in South Africa are not receiving a good quality education. We can say that poor quality education traps most people from working-class communities in poverty, and that South Africa's education system is failing the poor.

All public schools in South Africa receive government funding. Even though government technically gives more money to poor schools, this is not enough to narrow the gap between rich and poor schools. Most learners from working-class communities attend 'no-fee schools' that are not allowed to charge school fees. In itself, this is a good thing. At the same time, this is not succeeding in doing away with inequality. Schools in richer communities stay better resourced and can employ more and better qualified teachers because they are allowed to charge school fees. Often schools in richer communities also have more experienced school governance and management teams (see the fact sheet on 'School Governance and Management' for more on this).

We need to understand the reasons why schools and learners in poor communities are not performing as well as schools and learners in richer communities, and work to change this.