Fact sheet on child health

The status of child health

Mortality
- Despite a range of laws, policies and programmes to realise children’s right to health, there has been little improvement in child and infant mortality.
- South Africa is one of only 12 countries currently not on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal to reduce under-five mortality.\(^3\) While there is uncertainty around the exact levels of child mortality in South Africa, UNICEF estimates the under-five mortality rate has risen from 56 in 1990 to 67 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2008.\(^2\)
- 81% of child deaths in South Africa in 2007 were children under five years.\(^8\)
- Leading causes of under-five mortality are HIV/AIDs, neonatal causes and childhood infections (including diarrhoea and lower respiratory infections).\(^4\) Injury and trauma are the leading cause of death amongst older children.\(^5\)

Nutrition
- Malnutrition is a key contributing factor. 60% of children under five who died in hospital in 2005 – 2007 were underweight.\(^6\)
- In 2005 18% of 1 – 9-year-old children were stunted and 9% were underweight.\(^7\)

Social determinants

Poverty and inequality
- In 2008, 64% of children lived in the poorest 40% of households with an income of less than R570 per person per month.\(^8\)
- Poverty compromises children’s health and nutrition, impairs immunity and increases their exposure to illness and injury.
- Social assistance, in the form of the Child Support Grant, is associated with improved health and nutrition.\(^9\)
- In May 2010, more than 9.7 million children aged 0 – 16 years received the Child Support Grant. The grant will be made available to all eligible children under 18 years by 2012.\(^10\)

Living conditions
- Lack of access to safe water and sanitation leads to the spread of diarrhoea, bilharzia, intestinal worms and other water-borne diseases.
- In 2008, more than a third of children did not have access to adequate sanitation (39%) or piped drinking water on site (36%).\(^11\)
- Over 5 million children (30%) live in over-crowded conditions, which increase exposure to infectious diseases such as tuberculosis.\(^12\)
- One in 10 children (12%) lives in informal housing which leaves young children particularly vulnerable to burns and paraffin poisoning.\(^13\)

Cause of death for children under five years, 2000


Children living in income poverty, by province, 2008


Note: Children in households with a per capita monthly income of less than R570 in 2008 Rands

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Health services

Access to clinics
- Public health services are free for children under six, pregnant women, people with disabilities and social grant beneficiaries. Primary health care is free for all.
- High transport costs and long distances to health facilities may lead to life-threatening delays in accessing treatment. Over 7 million children (41%) have to travel more than 30 minutes to reach the nearest clinic.14
- There are large inequities between the private and public health service. The public sector provides care to an estimated 85% of children, yet only one-third of paediatricians service their needs.15
- Staff shortages also compromise the quality of health services: 36% of health professional posts in the public sector were vacant in 2008.16

HIV/AIDS
- HIV/AIDS is the leading driver of under-five mortality, and paediatric HIV would be nearly eliminated if prevention of mother-to-child transmission services reached all eligible women.
- 87% of pregnant women attending antenatal clinics were tested for HIV in 2008/09.17
- 29% of pregnant women who were tested in 2008 were HIV positive.18
- 76% of HIV-positive women received nevirapine to prevent transmission from mother to child in 2007/08.19
- 57% of newborns exposed to HIV received antiretroviral treatment in 2006/07.20

Child health services
- Immunisation coverage is a good indicator of the extent to which young children access primary health care services.
- Nearly 90% of children under 12 months were fully immunised in 2008/09; yet for individual districts, the rate ranged from 61% to 124%, showing large inequities in health care access, and obvious problems with data quality.21
- The coverage of essential preventative services is low: contraception (60%),22 early antenatal care (27%),23 vitamin A supplementation (29%)24 and exclusive breastfeeding for six months (26%).25

This fact sheet is an extract from a poster on Child Health, published by the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town, as a supplement to the South African Child Gauge 2009/2010. Visit www.ci.org.za.

Sources