

Special Article

# The avalanche of children requiring social services in the Western Cape

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South African social services currently face a crisis which is fuelled by the avalanche of children requiring assistance. In this essay, I focus on 10 major social problems affecting children within the Western Cape and the related demands made on the social services.

## Poverty and unemployment

In 1991, it was estimated that 17.3 million people and about half of all households lived below the minimum subsistence level.<sup>1</sup> This impacted on the infant mortality rate. In 1993, the rate of infant mortality was 24.4 out of 1 000 live births (Fig. 1) (Provincial Administration Western Cape: Social Services — personal communication, 1995).

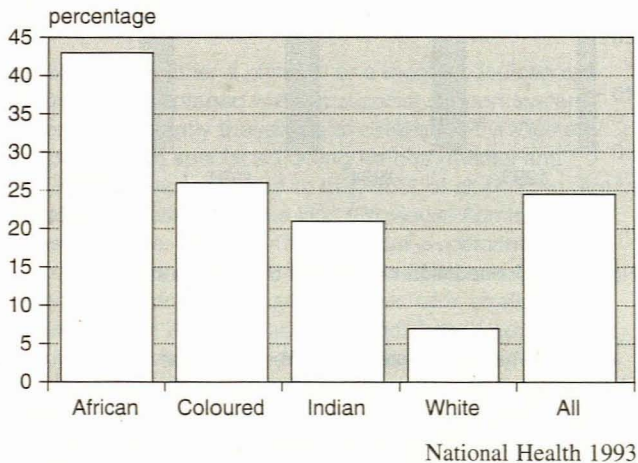


Fig. 1. Infant mortality rate, 1993, Western Cape.

The official unemployment rate of the Western Cape is 17.3% (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> At provincial level, however, the Western Cape maintains the lowest unemployment rate.

South Africa has a poor social security system with few available government grants. There are three means of social support with regard to children.

Firstly, a maintenance grant is available. One is only eligible if the breadwinner is deceased, incarcerated or disabled. Secondly, a foster care grant is available if the child is statutorily placed in the care of someone other than the parents and neither parent is willing or able to support

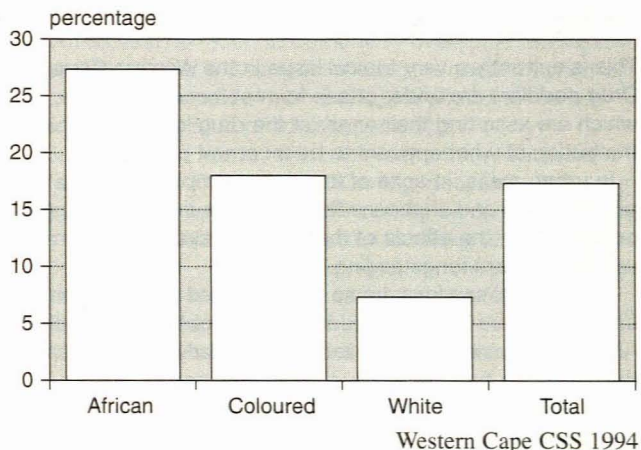


Fig. 2. Rate of unemployment, Western Cape.

the child financially. Thirdly, a care dependency grant is given when a child is mentally and/or physically handicapped to the extent that the child is totally dependent on the caregiver (Fig. 3) (Provincial Administration Western Cape: Social Services — personal communication, 1995). Following the investigations of the Lund commission, these child-related grants are to be significantly reduced.<sup>3</sup>

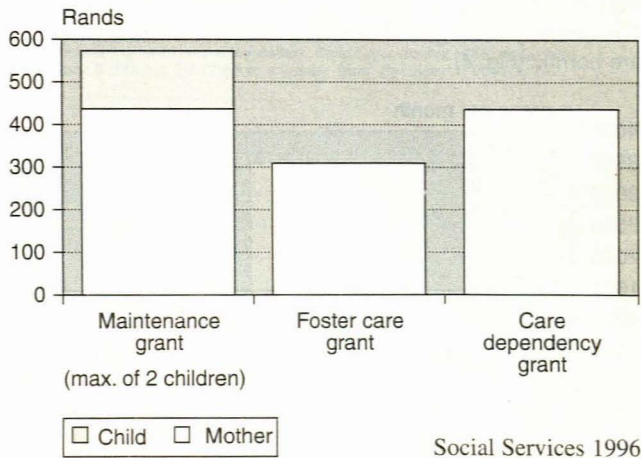


Fig. 3. Social security grants — monthly income per child, July 1996.

## Housing and overcrowding

Throughout South Africa, lack of housing is a major crisis. The Western Cape is no exception, with growing informal settlements and overcrowded subsidised accommodation. The number of houses required appears insurmountable.

A staggering 167 700 households (plus an added 54 000 in 5 years) are awaiting houses. This does not include the 63 000 service sites and the informal 'squatter' areas, where housing is also required (Cape Metropolitan Council Housing Department — personal communication, 1996). The implication of this crisis for children is vast: health problems, parental frustration and powerlessness, unmet educational needs, sex and violence.

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## Drug and alcohol abuse

This is currently a very topical issue in the Western Cape. Drug peddlers are under attack from community groups, which are asserting their anger at the drug lords and their frustration at what appears to be a corrupt police force.

In urban areas, in spite of the high unemployment rate and poverty, bars and shebeens flourish, while in rural farming communities, the effects of the old 'dop' system of payment with alcohol are longstanding.

State social services are so overwhelmed that, to a large extent, they are unable to address this problem effectively. Although counselling is available, particularly in cases where the child may be affected by the drinking or drug abuse, social services rely heavily on parastatal or private organisations for both the treatment and the prevention of drug and alcohol problems. Without community awareness and attitudinal changes, our children will continue to be harmed both physically and emotionally by the effects of drug and alcohol abuse.

## Violence and gangsterism

Our present violent society needs to be seen in the light of the apartheid system. Apartheid can be seen as one of the most pernicious forms of public violence this country has ever known. However, the culture of violence has remained. The monthly averages of violent crimes in the Western Cape are horrific (Fig. 4).<sup>4</sup>

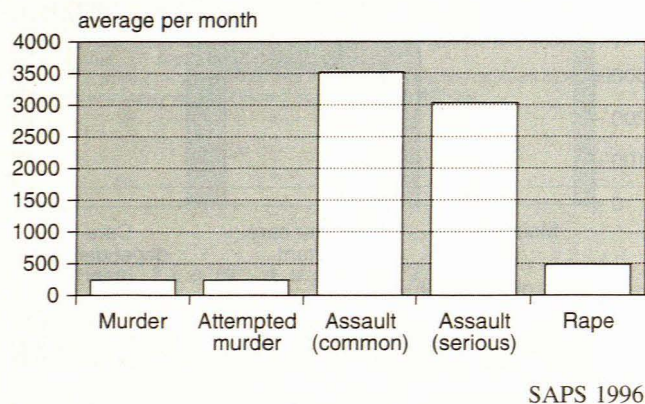


Fig. 4. Violent crimes 1996, Western Cape.

It would seem that our society, as a whole, is displaying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Children are not only displaying the symptoms of post-trauma but are daily witnessing ongoing and renewed violence.

As long as the police services struggle with their existing 0.02% of the regional budget,<sup>4</sup> social services will continue to 'pick up the pieces', as it were, with regard to counselling for children's emotional problems.

## Domestic violence

Conservative statistics suggest that in the Western Cape 1 in 4 women has been the victim of domestic violence

(NICRO Women's Support Centre — personal communication, 1996). Not only are many children at risk physically, but their understanding of normal family functioning is skewed.

## Child abuse

Child abuse is a complex and pervasive problem in all sectors of our society.

At Red Cross Children's Hospital a child abuse management team facilitates the management of the numerous cases of sexual and physical abuse. Monthly averages of confirmed abuse cases continue to escalate (J Hollingshead, Red Cross Hospital — unpublished data) (Fig. 5).<sup>5</sup> This has placed a huge load on our very busy hospital and, in particular, has overloaded the social workers.

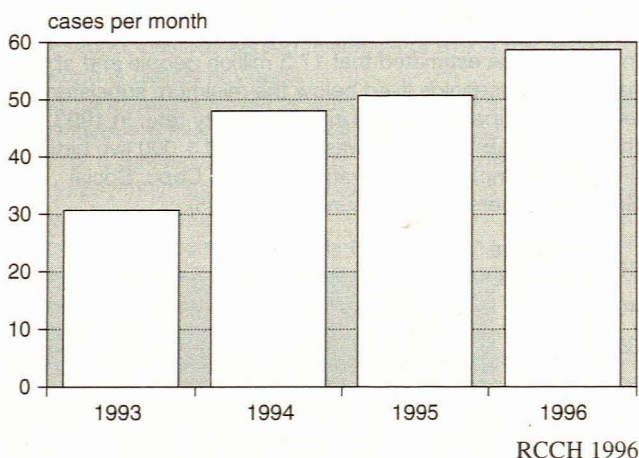


Fig. 5. Red Cross Children's Hospital child abuse statistics.

A further type of abuse in the Western Cape is that of child labour. Many adolescents who live on farms in the Western Cape are employed on these farms. These children, whose lives are already threatened by poverty, violence, alcohol abuse and insecurity, now find themselves victims of child labour.

## Child abandonment and neglect

Given the abovementioned social stresses, it is not too surprising that many children are abandoned and neglected. Social services offer haphazard crisis management, with no uniformity in respect of the removal of an abused or neglected child. In cases of abandonment and neglect children often require removal, although because of practical constraints, as well as apathy on the part of social services, many of these cases do not receive adequate attention. If a child is removed, little reconstructive work is provided, and a child may therefore remain in State care for inappropriately extended periods. In many cases, children's homes and other places of residential care are a 'place of safety' rather than a nurturing home environment.



In 1995, the Ministerial Committee on Young People At Risk was launched, headed by the present Minister of Welfare, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, in order to deal with the crisis within the child and youth care system and facilitate its transformation. This area is therefore hopefully undergoing a process of change.

## Street children

An ever-increasing number of street children is clearly visible in the environs of Cape Town. We are fortunate to have a State President with a personal interest in the plight of street children. Unfortunately the state social services have not begun to scratch the surface of the problem.

Social services have developed a new welfare policy on street children.<sup>5</sup> Its proposal is:

'Vulnerable children will be prevented from becoming street children, street children will be reconciled with their families and communities, and if the latter is impossible, alternative ways to reintegrate street children into society will be explored and made use of.'

Who exactly will uphold this policy? It will require massive financial and personnel expense on the part of social services, and resources have yet to be allocated.

## Children with disabilities

Children with either a physical or a mental handicap are hugely disadvantaged within our social support system. There are currently thousands of children in the Western Cape awaiting special schooling for both mental and physical handicap. Added to this, 50% of all children require special education of some kind (Provincial Administration Western Cape: Education Department — personal communication, 1995). At Red Cross Children's Hospital over 200 children are awaiting wheelchairs, strollers or prams (Social Work Department, Red Cross Hospital — unpublished data, 1996). Some children have been on this list for years, and are currently being carried back and forth by their caretakers.

## Children with AIDS

In the Western Cape the number of children with HIV and AIDS is increasing rapidly. At Red Cross Children's Hospital, the infectious diseases clinic was initiated to assist these children. The number of children seen increases significantly annually, and hospital social workers are being inundated with requests for pre-test and post-test counselling.

Related to this problem are the many children with AIDS, orphaned by parental death or desertion. Thankfully, in the Western Cape, there are a number of very nurturing parastatal and religious organisations which have come to the rescue in caring for these children.

In conclusion, it must be noted that social services are acutely aware of the needs facing our children, yet are immobilised by this avalanche. In the words of the South African UNICEF representative, Scholastica Kimaryo:<sup>6</sup>

'The difficulty in South Africa is that there are so many

personal and institutional agendas, so many competing priorities, and so much to be done to overcome the legacy of apartheid, that it is easy for the urgent needs of children — who are the weakest element in any society — to be sacrificed at the altar of adult expediency.'

Lastly, I would like to refer back to my title. Avalanche comes from the French word meaning 'descent'. Given the enormity of the problem and the cutting back of funding for trained personnel there has been a lowering of the standard of service, 'burn-out' and a feeling of impotence on the part of social workers, as well as a lack of credibility of the profession among clients.

An avalanche is defined in the dictionary as a mass of snow and dirt pounding down a mountainside. The purity and softness of the snow, which can be likened to children, is sadly contaminated by these dirty and dangerous problems, which added to the decline of social service delivery, compound the formation of this avalanche. An enormous task therefore lies before us!

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