What are child-headed households?
Child-headed households are commonly defined as households where all members are under 18 years. This is the definition of child-headed households used in this analysis.

How many children live in child-headed households?
An analysis of the 2006 General Household Survey found 0.67% of children living in child-headed households. This is equivalent to roughly 122 000 children out of 18.2 million children in South Africa.

Is the proportion of child-headed households growing?
No. Twenty nationally representative surveys spanning the period 2000-2007 indicate no increase in the proportion of children living in child-headed households.

Are most of the children in child-headed households AIDS orphans?
No. Most children living in child-headed households are not orphans at all. The 2006 General Household Survey found that only 8% of children living in child-headed households were children who had lost both their mother and father. 80% had a living mother.

How many children usually live in a child-headed household?
In 2006 almost half (44%) of child-headed households consisted of only one child. Most child-headed households have between one and three members.

How old are children in child-headed households?
Over half (55%) of children living in child-headed households are 14 or older. In the vast majority (88%) of child-headed households there is at least one child who is 15 or older.

Where are most child-headed households in South Africa?
About 90% of all child-headed households are located in three provinces – Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

Statements about child-headed households are often not based on evidence
Common but inaccurate assumptions about child-headed households abound. Some examples are captured in the following quotes from recent government and NGO publications:
• “A notable feature of the HIV and AIDS pandemic is the sharp growth in numbers of child-headed households.”
• “Older children have the adult burden of caring for younger brothers and sisters. This forces many to drop out of school in an effort to survive.”
• “The prevalence of child-headed households in South Africa is reported to be increasing steadily. There have been reports in the media of areas in the country where a substantial proportion (up to 65%) of households in a particular community are headed by children.”

The evidence presented in this brief challenges these understandings.
Due to the HIV epidemic, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of children in South Africa who are double orphans. The proportion of children who are double orphans increased over the period 2002 to 2006 from 2% (357 000 children) to 4% (660 000 children). In spite of this increase the proportion of children in child-headed households has not changed over the same period.

The proportion of children living in child-headed households was 0.67% in 2006. This is not significantly different from the 2002 estimate (0.65%).

Figure 1 presents an analysis of 20 national surveys between 2002 and 2007. It was found that the proportion of children in child-headed households has remained between 0.55% and 0.85%, with no increasing trend over time.

The proportion of orphans is increasing but the proportion of child-headed households is not

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**Most children living in child-headed households have a living parent**

Many people assume that child-headed households are the result of an increase in orphaning. But figure 2 shows that most children living in child-headed households have two living parents (61%) and 80% have a living mother. Only 8% are double orphans.

Most double orphans live in households with adults, suggesting that kinship networks continue to provide care for these children. Only 1.5% of children who are double orphans live in child-headed households.
Children who live in child-headed households tend to be older than children in mixed-generation households. Most child-headed households (88%) have at least one child older than 15.

Figure 3 compares the age distribution of children living in child-headed households with those living in mixed-generation households. The figure shows that the distribution is skewed towards older children in child-headed households, while children in mixed-generation households are far more evenly distributed across the age range. Whereas 40% of children in mixed-generation households are under seven years, only 8% of children in child-headed households are in this young age group.

What else do the surveys tell us about child-headed households?

**LIVING ENVIRONMENT**

Children in child-headed households live in conditions that are on average worse than those in mixed-generation households. Child-headed households are less likely to live in formal dwellings, or to have access to adequate sanitation and water on site. This is partly because they are disproportionately located outside of cities, where better services are available.

**WORK**

Very few children in child-headed households are working to earn income (6% of child-headed households have an employed household member over 15 years).

**GRANTS**

Social grants are an important source of income for millions of people in South Africa. As children in child-headed households are older, on average, than in mixed-generation households, fewer children fall within the eligible age threshold for child support grants (up to 14 years). In addition, there are no pensioners living in these households. This means that child-headed households will have less access to income support through social grants.

**INCOME**

Remittances – money sent by family members or other adults living elsewhere – are the main source of income for child-headed households (77%). This suggests that the majority of children living in these circumstances are not forced into self-sufficiency and do have some kind of support. However, the reliance on remittances in the absence of earnings and grants means income may be unreliable.

**SCHOOL**

The vast majority of children in child-headed households attend school (95%). This is the same attendance rate as reported for children in mixed-generation households.
The number of children living in child-headed households is cause for concern

- Approximately 122,000 children live in child-headed households. While this is a very small proportion of children in South Africa, the number is not insignificant.
- Child-headed households are at risk of having to cope not only without adults, but also with poorer living conditions than other children. They lack regular income from earnings and social grants, and are disproportionately located in non-urban areas, where service delivery is poor.

Interventions based on wrong assumptions may be inappropriate

- While it is possible that the burden of HIV on families and communities might lead to a growth in child-headed households in the future, the evidence to date shows no increase in the proportion of children living in such circumstances. This is despite the increases in both HIV prevalence and orphaning over the same period.
- A solitary focus on HIV and its related orphaning as the cause of child-headed households masks other important issues and risks the development of inappropriate policies, programmes and interventions. The vast majority of children in child-headed households have at least one living parent.
- A disproportionate focus on child-headed households may be at the expense of children whose lives are compromised in other ways. Income poverty, poor service delivery and access to social infrastructure are not specific to child-headed households.

More research is needed to understand child-headed households better

- The possibilities for analysis are limited by the small number of child-headed households captured in national surveys, as well as the “snapshot in time” nature of these surveys, and the narrow definition of “household”.
- To ensure policy and programming are appropriately focused and formulated, it will be important to track child-headed households over time. More research is needed to shed light on the events that lead to the formation of child-headed households, as well as their duration and circumstances. Longitudinal panel surveys and good qualitative research will best achieve this.