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EVIDENCE BRIEF: South African Medical Research Council

# DECREASE IN DEATHS FROM CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN SOUTH AFRICA: TWO NATIONAL SURVEYS SHOW DECLINE OVER 8 YEARS FROM 2009 TO 2017

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## Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (CAN) has a lifelong impact on affected children, and each year many cases of CAN result in fatalities. In South Africa hardly a day passes without the media highlighting another case of a child being abducted or kidnapped and murdered, pointing to the very high rate of child murder in the country. The Gender & Health Research Unit of the South African Medical Research Council has been studying deaths from child abuse and neglect (CAN) since 2009, when its research showed that more than one child died every day in South Africa from CAN. This evidence brief summarises the findings of the second National Study of Child Murder which examined the killing of children in 2017 and it presents a comparison with the findings with those of 2009. In so doing, it seeks to address the key question: *is there any evidence that the national efforts to combat child abuse and neglect in South Africa are having any impact on deaths of children from abuse and neglect?*

## Study methods

We collected data from a random sample of medico-legal mortuaries in South Africa and from interviews with the police. First, we collected data on all cases of unnatural deaths of children aged 0-17 years in 81 sampled mortuaries, randomly selected from all those in the country. In each, we gathered information on all deceased children who were registered at the mortuary between 1 January and 31st December 2017 as injury deaths resulting from likely intentional violence, abuse and/or neglect, that were referred for inquests, and cases of unnatural death where the circumstances were undetermined. We identified the mortuary file for each case and extracted information from the autopsy reports. Thereafter, we conducted interviews with South African Police Services (SAPS) Investigating Officers to verify that the death was considered to be due to murder and if so, to record what was known of the circumstances, the suspected perpetrator, the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, and the case outcome. We excluded cases from the study where it was concluded that the death was not (or most likely not) an intentional killing and/or due to abuse and neglect. We also excluded cases that were highly decomposed or skeletons, where the death was unnatural as a result of injury, but further information on the death could not be established. Such cases are seldom successfully investigated unless a perpetrator reveals the crime. The 2017 study had largely the same study design as the 2009 study. We used the same definition of CAN in both studies (See Box 1).

### BOX 1: Definition Death from child abuse and neglect

*Death of a child from a deliberately inflicted injury, physical neglect or negligence within the context of a relationship of presumed responsibility and care by a parent or other caregiver, or deaths with evidence of rape or sexual assault where the perpetrator may not be in a care-giving relationship with the victim. Based on the outcome of a police investigation.*

The survey design allowed for the data to be weighted to provide national estimates. We present an analysis showing the number of deaths from CAN, and the proportion of the sample in different categories using percentages. When rates are presented, for children over the age of 1 year, we present rates of death per 100 000 population, whereas, for those under 1 year, we present rates of death per 100 000 live births. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the South African Medical Research Council, and further approval and access to data were obtained from the National and Provincial Departments of Health and the SAPS.

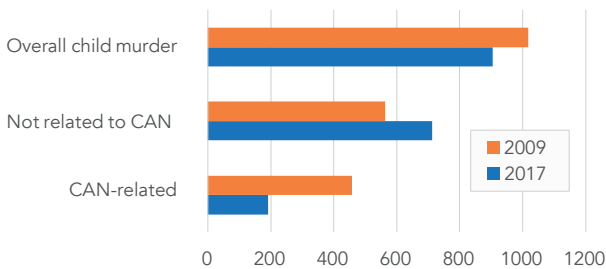
# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. Reduction in the overall number of child murders, with deaths due to abuse and neglect more than halved

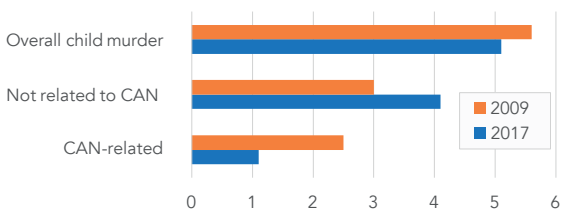
A total of 905 children were estimated to have been murdered in South Africa in 2017. This is fewer than the 1018 children we estimated to have been killed in 2009 (see Figure 1). Considering differences in the number of children in the country between the two years, our analysis suggests that there were 9% fewer children killed intentionally or due to abuse and neglect in 2017 than in 2009 (Incidence rate ratio 0.91 (95% Confidence Intervals 0.8-1.03)).

We estimate that there were 192 deaths of children from abuse and neglect in 2017, this is a much lower number than the 458 deaths found in 2009. This shows that the number of child deaths that stemmed from abuse and neglect had more than halved over the eight years (Figure 1). When we consider changes in the number of children in the population and compare the CAN-related death rates, we find there to be a 56% reduction in deaths from CAN from 2009 to 2017 (Figure 2). Figure 2 also shows that there was a one-third increase in murders of children that were unrelated to CAN in 2017.

In 2009, among the children whose gender could be determined, there were 276 girl child murders from CAN and 178 boy child murders. In 2017, there were 88 girl's child murders and 96 boy child murders. Thus in 2017 the gender differential in child murder from CAN, that had previously shown an increased risk for girl-children, is no longer visible.



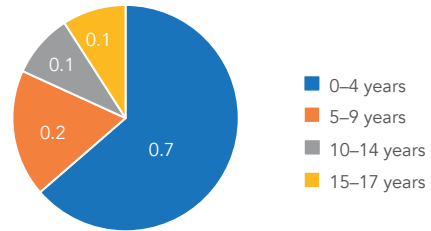
**Figure 1: Number of child murders in South Africa in 2009 and 2017**



**Figure 2: Child murder rate: number of murders per 100 000 children, comparing CAN-related and others, 2009 and 2017**

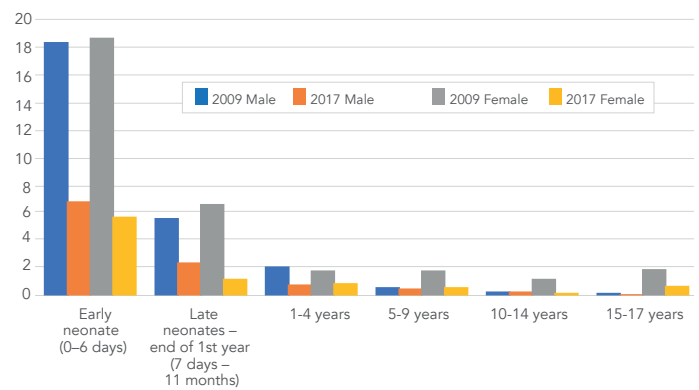
## 2. Most children who die from abuse and neglect do so in the first year of life and the greatest reduction in deaths is in murder of children in the first year of life

Examination of the ages at which children die from abuse and neglect shows that the most at-risk age group are those under 5 years, however deaths can occur at any age across childhood (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Age distribution of children dying from abuse and neglect in 2017 (based on age standardised rates)**

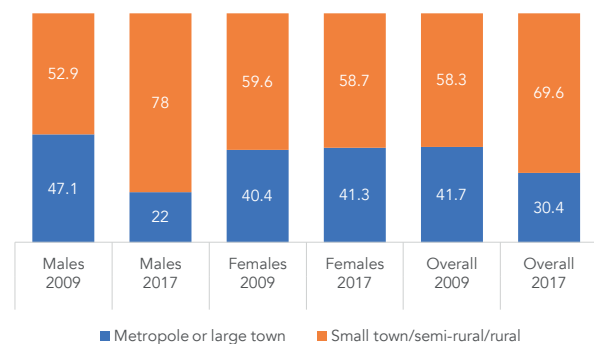
When we look in more detail at the under 5 age group, we see that most deaths occur in the first 6 days after birth. The largest reduction in deaths from abuse and neglect has been in the killing of children in the first year of life, particularly in the killing of girl children. There has been about a 73% reduction in deaths of girls from CAN in this age group, and a 61% reduction in deaths of boys (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Age-specific child death rates from abuse and neglect by year, per 100 000 live births (for ages <1 year), and per 100 000 population for 1-17 years**

## 3. The majority of children are murdered in rural areas

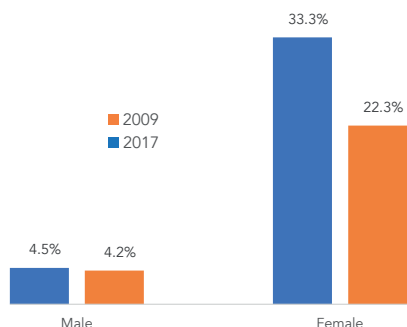
Most children are murdered in rural areas and the proportion of children murdered in rural areas has increased since 2009 (Figure 5). In 2009, 58.3% of deaths from abuse and neglect occurred in metropolises and large towns, and this increased to 69.6% by 2017. However, the change was only seen in the deaths of boy children. The proportion of murders of boys occurring in urban areas reduced by more than half from 47.1% in 2009 to 22.0% in 2017.



**Figure 5: Proportion of deaths from child abuse and neglect occurring in large urban areas v. rural or small towns in 2009 and 2017**

#### 4. The proportion of cases with suspected rape or sexual assault has substantially declined for girl children

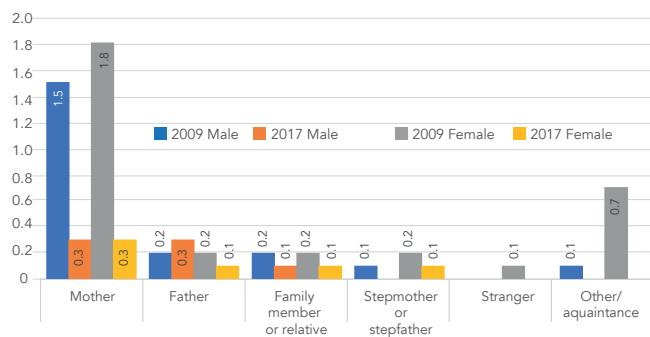
The murder of children with associated suspected rape or sexual assault is part of the definition of murder related to child abuse. Figure 6 shows that the proportion of cases in girls had substantially reduced in 2017 from 2009. However, a sexual element to the killing was suspected in more than 1 in 5 cases (22% of the 88 cases in 2017 compared to 33.3% [92/276] cases in 2009) perpetrated by caregivers and persons who were not caregivers.



**Figure 6: Murder of children with suspected rape or sexual assault, 2009 and 2017**

#### 5. The proportion of children killed by their mothers has decreased. In 2017, boys were just as likely to be killed by their fathers as their mothers, whereas girls were most often killed by their mothers

Among all children killed, there were substantially more cases where the perpetrator was not known in 2017 than in 2009, 29% of cases in 2017 v. 10% in 2009. Whilst we recognise that it is not always possible to have a suspect in a murder case, the large increase in the proportion of cases without a suspect likely reflects much poorer case investigation. Comparing cases for which the perpetrator was known, it was apparent that the profile of perpetrators killing children from abuse and neglect has changed substantially between 2009 and 2017 (Figure 7).



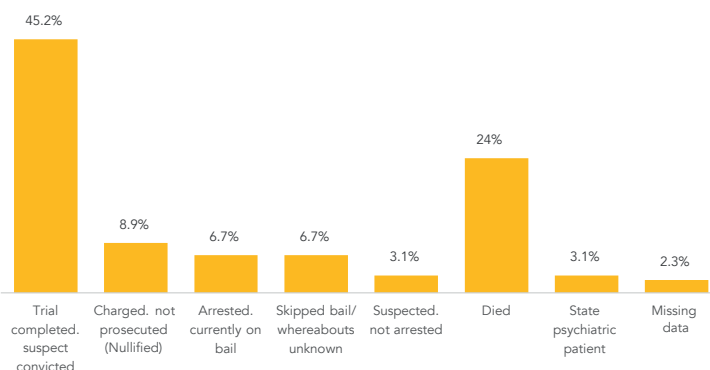
**Figure 7: Rates of death from child abuse and neglect by perpetrator and gender, 2009 & 2017, per 100 000 live births**

The proportion of cases where the murder was perpetrated by the child's mother reduced overall, with the greatest reduction seen for killing of girl children. In 2017 fathers were more often identified as the perpetrator of deaths of boy children than in 2009, and they more frequently killed boys than girls. By definition, cases of child abuse and neglect are perpetrated by caregivers, except where the deaths involve rape or sexual

assault. These cases may be perpetrated by strangers or acquaintances. The data show that strangers are rarely known to be the perpetrators in cases of abuse and neglect, and cases perpetrated by an acquaintance have reduced from 2009. The Investigating Officers did not identify strangers as perpetrators in any case in 2017, but it is likely that they were responsible for some of the 29% of cases where no suspect was identified.

#### 6. Among the cases with an identified perpetrator, over 80% of cases had been closed with a definitive outcome after 2.5-3.5 years

At the time of the interview with the SAPS Investigating Officer in 2020/1, 72.3% of cases of child death from abuse and neglect had been closed with the suspect convicted, committed by the State to a psychiatric institution or the suspect was dead (Figure 8). In the cases of the suspect's death, 17.3% of suspects committed suicide and 6.7% had otherwise died. In 8.9% of cases the Prosecutor declined to pursue the prosecution (nullified). In 6.7% of cases the suspect was on bail, implying that the case may still progress to trial. Most of the cases where a perpetrator had been identified had a satisfactorily legal case outcome.



**Figure 8: Outcome of the case against an identified perpetrator of a CAN murder in 2017, at the time of the SAPS interview in 2020/1**

### Discussion

Our research has shown that between 2009 and 2017 there was a substantial reduction in deaths from child abuse and neglect (CAN) in South Africa. Critically, the gender differential in murder by CAN, which has mirrored long-standing evidence of a greater risk of non-fatal injuries of young girls from assault,<sup>1</sup> is no longer visible. However, there is also, very worryingly, a large increase in murder of children unrelated to CAN that is mainly of teenagers. We have shown that the greatest change has been in CAN deaths in the first year of life, particularly the murder of girls (female infanticide), which has substantially reduced in number. Most children who die from abuse and neglect do so in the first year of their life. Sex-related murder has reduced, with one in five cases of girl-child killings including a suspected sexual element in 2017 compared with one in three in 2009.

Most deaths from abuse and neglect occur in rural areas, and the proportion murdered here has increased. Between 2009 and 2017, the proportion occurring in large towns or metropolises was reduced by a quarter due to a disproportionate reduction in boy-child deaths in urban areas. In 2017, 70% of murders from abuse and neglect occurred in rural areas and small towns, which is where about 43% of the population of South Africa live according to the 2018 General Household Survey.

Among cases for whom the perpetrator was known, our data

show that mothers were significantly less likely to kill their children in 2017 than in 2009. There was evidence, however, that the quality of the investigation of deaths from abuse and neglect by SAPS has sharply deteriorated. This is reflected in the fact that in 2017 in almost a third of cases there was no suspect or perpetrator identified, compared to 10% of cases in 2009. However, when a perpetrator was identified, our research has shown that most cases were closed with a satisfactory legal case outcome. Three-quarters had been closed with a definitive outcome (conviction, forensic mental health commitment, or suspect deceased) at the time of interview, which was about 2.5-3.5 years after the death. Just under 10% were closed by the prosecutor who declined to prosecute, and in most of these cases it was because the suspect was a child. A further group of suspects (6.7%) were still on bail, and likely being prosecuted. Very few had not been arrested, had skipped bail or were otherwise of whereabouts unknown.

The overall decline in child killings that we attribute to abuse and neglect, particularly by mothers, could have several explanations. There may have been a progressive reduction in unwanted pregnancies, through wider contraceptive use and termination of pregnancy. However, the 2016 South Africa Demographic and Health Survey found a greater percentage of births were unwanted in 2016 than in 1998 (20% v. 17%).<sup>2</sup> It is also possible that social activism around abuse of the women and children, and small-scale programmes in the community, possibly coupled with measures from the Department of Social Development, have had some impact. Although it would be surprising if there had been this much impact, given the low intensity of these measures and limited reach of child protection programmes in communities. A more likely explanation is that there has been greater access to the Child Support Grant (CSG). The CSG is a small grant (R380 in 2017) that has been shown to provide women access to financial resources, but it is not sufficient to overcome poverty.

The CSG's availability has been extended since 2009. The number of low-income caregivers, mostly mothers, who received the CSG increased from 9 million to 12 million from 2009 to 2017.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, children were eligible up to 13 years and then the eligibility age was increased annually until 2013 when it was made available for all eligible children under 18 years.<sup>4</sup> Not all eligible caregivers receive grants, and a particular barrier is the lack of caregiver identity documents (ID). During the period from 2009, there was a major initiative to expand access to ID documents, and by 2014, 82.5% of caregivers of eligible children received the grant.

Research shows that the CSG has changed the way children are viewed in communities. There is considerable evidence that the grant has made children a financial resource within many families and communities.<sup>4,5</sup> In some communities, it is recognised that mothers are having more children in order to get the grant, and overall the birth rate amongst grant recipients is higher than among non-recipients.<sup>5,6</sup> There is also evidence that mothers and grandmothers who are grant recipients have experienced the resource provided by the grant as empowering in ways that extend well beyond the monetary value provided. Women describe having greater dignity, autonomy and decision-making powers as grant recipients.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it seems likely that the greater part of the explanation for the very large reduction in CAN murders under 1 year of age is the CSG. This has shifted the narrative around children in some resource-poor homes from them being seen as a burden on the home, and more specifically the mother, to them being seen as a resource and an avenue for greater empowerment of the caregiver.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

For as long as one child dies from abuse and neglect our country cannot rest, however, our findings show a marked reduction in fatal child abuse and neglect over the period between 2009 and 2017 in South Africa. Very importantly for our struggle for gender equality, we have seen that the increased risk of murder of girl children that was previously reported is not seen in 2017. This is incredibly important as it demonstrates that child abuse and neglect, especially female infanticide, is preventable. We have suggested that the most likely explanation is due to the availability of the CSG. Yet, we have shown that all efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect need to be redoubled in rural areas and the role of SAPS in case investigation must be strengthened. We need to ensure that there is no back-sliding on the gains shown and that justice is delivered for all children killed in South Africa.

## Acknowledgements

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## Recommended citation

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