

# Post-COVID Early Childhood Care and Education enrolment gaps in South Africa: Exploring Demand and Supply Influences

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All children in South Africa have rights to health, protection, survival and development that agoal for South Africa is to ensure that all children have access to quality Early Childhood Care and Education<sup>1</sup> (ECCE) services. This discussion brief summarises the main findings from a study to determine which factors are associated with post-COVID ECCE centre enrolment.

## Main Findings



1. By 2022 ECCE enrolment rates had not yet matched pre-COVID enrolment rates. According to the General Household Survey (GHS) 6 out of 10 children 5 years old and younger were not enrolled in an ECCE centre in 2022.



2. Household income matters for ECCE enrolment. 54.1 percent of children living in the richest 20 percent of households were enrolled in an ECCE centre in 2022. In contrast, only 23.2 percent of children from the poorest 20 percent of households were enrolled in an ECCE centre.



3. The more educated the child's mother is, the more likely that the child will be enrolled in an ECCE centre.



4. Unemployment and economic inactivity are negatively associated with

enrolment. Households where there is at least one unemployed or economically inactive person have lower ECCE centre enrolment rates than households where all adults are working.



5. Single parenthood increases enrolment. Enrolment is highest in households where parents or primary caregivers are unmarried or not living with a partner.



6. Living near to an ECCE programme matters. Children living further away from ECCE centres are far less likely to be enrolled than those children living closer to ECCE centres. Access to ECCE centres is worst in rural areas, meaning that poor children in these areas are least able to overcome nutrition and development challenges that are attributable to their home environments.

## 1. Why enrolment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) matters for children and their families

Early childhood education and care (ECCE) are important inputs in children's learning outcomes and later success in the job market<sup>2,3</sup>. The provision of ECCE services can contribute directly to poverty alleviation through increased labour market participation for parents, aid mathematics and language skills development,



and can help children in poor households overcome nutrition and stimulation deficits. Given the critical role that ECCE plays in child development and welfare of the family, understanding which factors associated with ECCE programme enrolment rates may contribute to resources being directed in more targeted and sustainable ways.

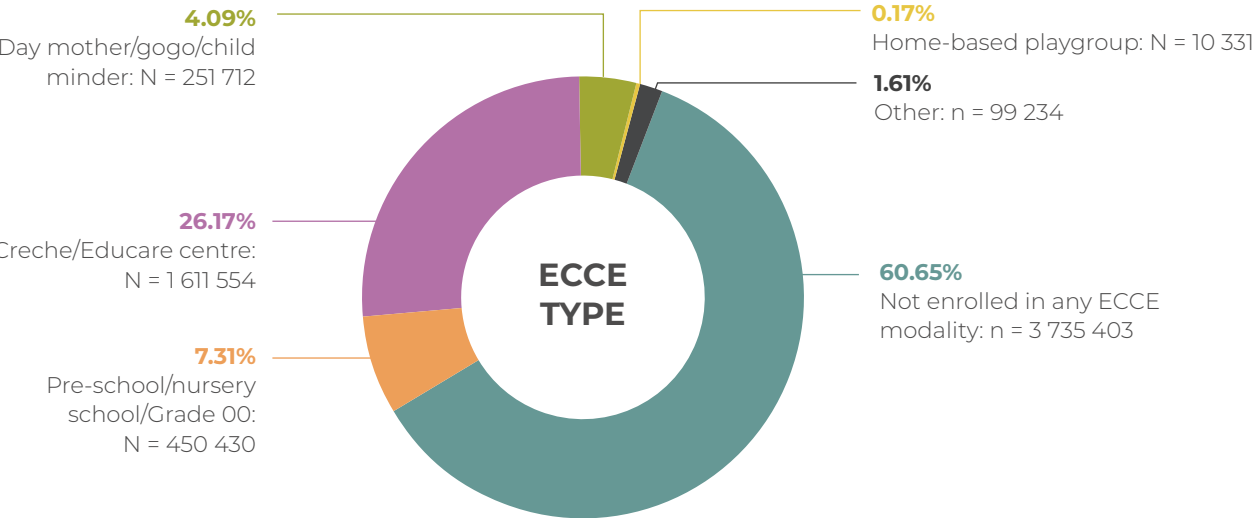
## 2. How are Early Childhood Care and Education centres defined in this study?

This paper uses the General Household Survey (GHS) 2022 data<sup>4</sup> matched to the Early Childhood Development Census 2021 data<sup>5</sup>. The term ECCE, according to the Audit of Early Childhood Development Centres National Report<sup>6</sup>, can refer to:

*“... a crèche, day care centre for young children, a pre-school, and/or after school care. Exclusions include Grade R classes attached to a primary school and home-based programmes with less than six children run by day mothers and child minders and/or play groups and for the purposes of the audit those with no children under the age of 6.”*

In this study a child is defined as being enrolled in an ECCE centre if that child is attending a pre-school, nursery school, crèche or educare centre. Children aged between 0 and 5 years old are the focus of this study. Using this definition, 33.48 percent or almost 2.1 million children five years and younger were enrolled in an ECCE centre in 2022 (sum of the green and tan bars in Figure 1).

**Figure 1: ECCE enrolment by ECCE type (excluding Grade R and school): Children 0 to 5-years-old**

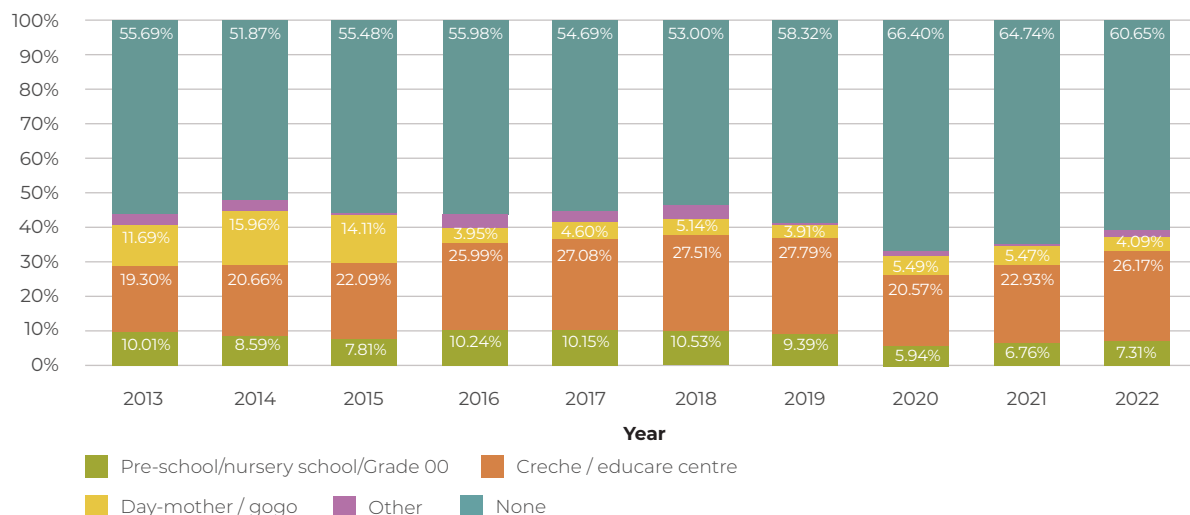


**Source:** Adapted from General Household Survey 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023).  
**\*Notes:** Children enrolled in Grade R and primary education are excluded from our sample.

Figure 2 shows ECCE arrangements (formal and informal) by type and year. In the four years before COVID restrictions, ECCE centre enrolment rates had fluctuated between 36 percent and 38 percent. Centre enrolments then decreased to a low of 27 percent in 2020, followed by a recovery to 33.5 percent in 2022.

<sup>4</sup>The term Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to all care and education offered in a structured setting for children from birth up to, and including, pre-primary school age. Early Childhood Development (ECD) is an umbrella term “which applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially” (DOE, 1995:33). Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, this study focuses on ECCE rather than ECD.

**Figure 2: ECCE enrolment by ECCE type (excluding Grade R and school): Children 0 to 5 years old**



**Source:** Own calculations using General Household Surveys 2013 to 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2014 to 2023).

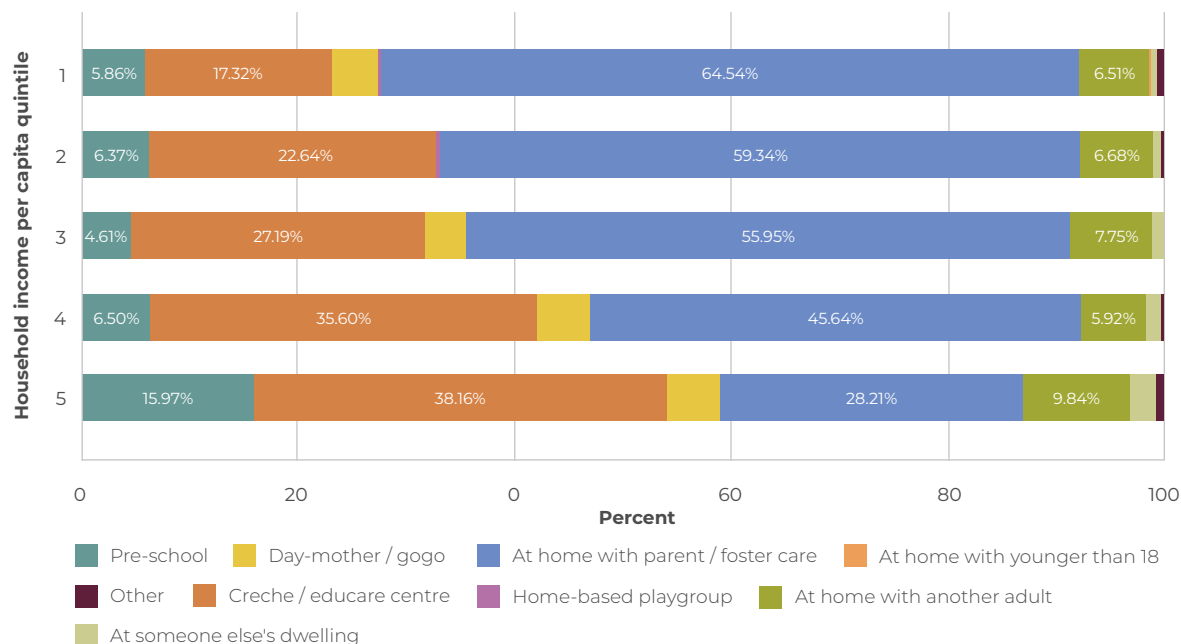
**\*Notes:** Children enrolled in Grade R and primary education are excluded from our sample. Only children enrolled in pre-school, creche or educare centre are considered to be enrolled.

### 3. Key factors associated with ECCE centre enrolment in South Africa

#### 3.1 Poorer children are less likely to be enrolled in an ECCE centre

Figure 3 shows the ECCE arrangements for children aged 0 to 5 years, ranked by their household per capita income quintile<sup>ii</sup>. Children from poorer households are less likely to be enrolled in an ECCE centre, and are therefore at risk of starting primary schooling at a significant disadvantage, as they have less exposure to structured and unstructured learning opportunities.

**Figure 3: ECCE facility for children 5 years old and younger, by household income per capita quintile (2022)**



**Source:** Own calculations using General Household Survey 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

**\*Notes:** Children enrolled in Grade R and primary education are excluded from our sample. Only children enrolled in pre-school, creche or educare centre are considered to be enrolled.

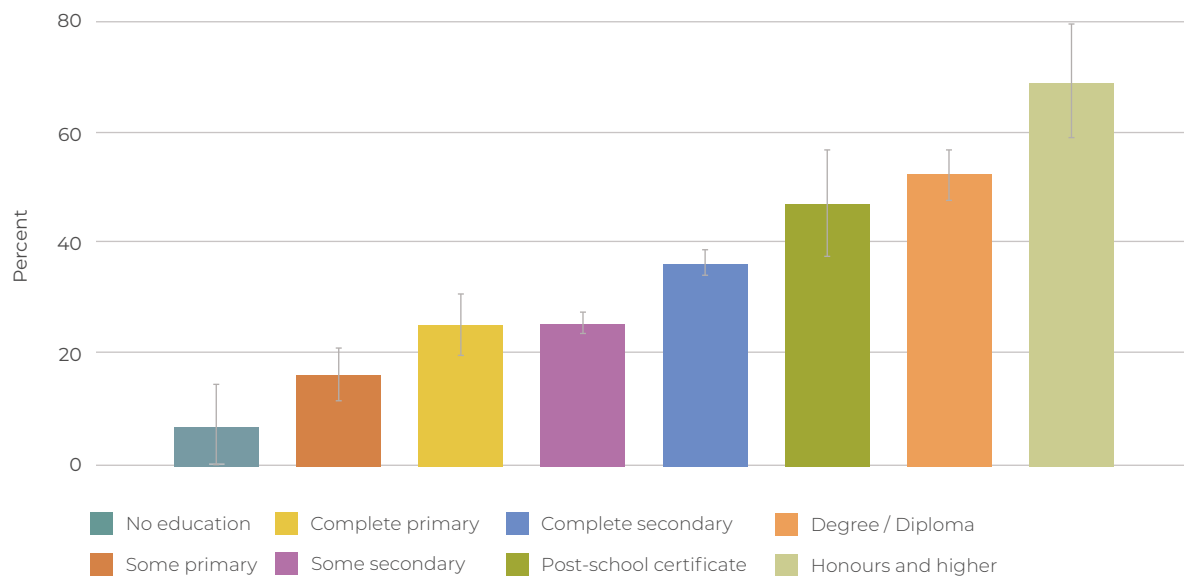
<sup>ii</sup>Total household income is divided by the number of individuals within the household to get per capita household income. The per capita household incomes are then ranked from poorest to richest, and then divided into five income categories of equal size (referred to as income quintiles). Quintile 1 would consist of the poorest 20 percent of the population, while Quintile 5 would consist of the richest 20 percent of the population.



### 3.2 More educated primary caregivers are more likely to enrol their children in ECCE centres

Figure 4 shows that enrolment increases as the mother's educational attainment increases. This is expected as parents or caregivers with more understanding or appreciation of the benefits of early childhood education are more likely to enrol their children in ECCE centres<sup>7</sup>.

**Figure 4: Percentage of children 5 years and younger who are enrolled in an ECCE centre, by mother or primary caregiver's educational attainment (2022)**



**Source:** Own calculations using General Household Survey 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

**\*Notes:** Children enrolled in Grade R and primary education are excluded from our sample. Only children enrolled in pre-school, creche or educare centre are considered to be enrolled.

### 3.3 Unemployed adults in the household reduce the probability of ECCE centre enrolment

Having at least one person who is unemployed or economically inactive in the household reduces the probability of a child being enrolled by 11.1 percent<sup>iii</sup>. GHS 2022 data show that 58 percent of children aged between 0 and 5 years live in households where there is at least one individual aged 15 years or older who is not attending school, in addition to being unemployed or economically inactive.

### 3.4 Parent or primary caregiver marital status

Children of single parents or primary caregivers are more likely to be enrolled in ECCE, relative to children of couples, even when accounting for area and other household characteristics.

### 3.5 Having an ECCE centre within 2km is associated with higher enrolment rates

Living close to an ECCE centre (within 2km of the household) is associated with a 21 percent increase in enrolment rates over households where the nearest ECCE centre is more than 2kms away, even after controlling for area type and income quintile.

<sup>iii</sup>As estimated in a multivariate regression.



## 4. Policy recommendations

Four main policy recommendations in support of the provision of universal ECCE services emerge from this research:

**1. Address household finance constraints that affect ECCE enrolment.** Poorer households may need financial assistance in the forms of conditional cash transfers or demand-side vouchers to increase enrolment. However, the feasibility and impact of providing such incentives to the household need to be examined in environments where information systems are weak and quality ECCE programmes are in short supply. A simpler solution may be to simply increase the size of the per-child subsidy received by qualifying ECCE programmes, which would lower user fees.

**2. Increase the supply of well-functioning ECCE programmes in remote areas.** Children living in South Africa's more rural areas are far less likely to be enrolled in ECCE than their urban resident counterparts and may benefit considerably from the increased supply of ECCE programmes in their areas. Here investment grants to help new ECCE programmes cover startup and compliance costs so that they can access subsidies could help stimulate the supply of ECD programmes. It is extremely important that the expansion of programmes, particularly in remote areas, is supported adequately by funding and training opportunities to ensure that the quality of ECCE is high even as access increases.

**3. Promote the expansion of ECCE by reconsidering the regulatory framework around centre registration.** Unregistered centres and less formal ECCE modalities play a critical role in providing care and education services that may not be accessible in their absences. Considering a more flexible regulatory framework to support such ECCE modalities more meaningfully could make significant inroads into providing universal access to ECCE.

**4. Conduct further research that focuses on the relationship between unemployed adults in the household, parental absence and ECCE enrolment.** The findings in this study suggest that ECCE centre enrolment rates are negatively influenced by the presence of unemployed or economically inactive adults in the household. While parental absence is associated with increased enrolment rates, depressed labour markets and extremely low economic growth prospects are likely to have a marked impact on the ECCE sector for some time, if the need for ECCE services is tied strongly to unemployment.



## 5. References

<sup>1</sup>Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Heckman, J. 2008. The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children. CESifo DICE Report. 6. 3-8.

<sup>3</sup>Van der Gaag, J. & Putcha, V., 2015, Investing in early childhood development: What is being spent, and what does it cost? Washington, DC: Brookings Global.

<sup>4</sup>Statistics South Africa. 2023. General Household Survey 2022 [dataset]. Version 1. Pretoria: Statistics SA [producer], 2022. Cape Town: DataFirst [distributor]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25828/TN4S-HR61>

<sup>5</sup>Department of Basic Education. 2022. Early Childhood Development Census 2021 [dataset]. Version 2. Pretoria: DBE [producer], 2021. Cape Town: DataFirst [distributor], 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25828/KBNX-MA29>.

<sup>6</sup>Department of Social Development and the Economic Policy Research Institute. 2014. Audit of Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres National Report. Available at <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ECDAuditNationalReport20140731ReviewedFINALVersionES11.pdf>. Accessed on the 20th December 2020.

<sup>7</sup>Jonsson, J. O., & Erikson, R. (2000). Understanding educational inequality: The Swedish experience. *L'Annee sociologique* (1940/1948). *Troisieme serie*, 50(2), 345–382.

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