



Investing in the home and community can protect children's futures

Research shows how financial security at both the home and community levels can be beneficial for children and the country in different ways

Despite substantial improvements in poverty reduction, economic growth and social protection, inequalities in South Africa persist, with progress particularly stifled amongst the poorest communities. Research has shown the importance of both the family or home environment and the community or neighbourhood environment for positive outcomes – health, wellbeing, education, and more. Just as there are variations in child outcomes within and between households, we see variations in outcomes within and between communities. For example, schools within resource-constrained communities may underperform, resulting in poorer educational outcomes at the community level, compared to a neighbouring, better-functioning school system. But within a community, children from individual households will have varying levels of educational attainment.

South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 aims to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030. Three important strategies, among many others, to achieve the NDP 2030 goals are reducing unemployment through the provision of quality education, social protection that improves living conditions, and improved

community safety. Ultimately, our national progress requires strengthening of the family, the community, and the state.

What we did

In this study, we explored the ways in which a child's home and community environment influenced their adult outcomes. We used data from the Birth to Thirty (Bt30) cohort, which enrolled children in 1990 from the Soweto-Johannesburg metropolitan area and followed them up to age 28 in 2018. We focused on the socio-economic status of the household and the neighbourhoods within the Soweto area. We examined two outcomes – educational attainment and engagement in criminal activities – two salient social challenges in South Africa.

What we found

- We found that both the immediate home environment and the community environment play an important role in a child's life, more strongly for educational attainment than criminality. In other words, the socioeconomic status of the family and that of the neighbourhood have a greater impact on a child's future education than their engagement in criminal activities.



- There were weaker relationships between both home and community socioeconomic status and criminality in adulthood. This suggests that early socioeconomic status, although a key driver of criminal behaviour, may be less important than other factors, especially those experienced during adolescence.

To reduce criminal behaviour among young people, interventions beyond improving the socioeconomic status of the home and community are necessary, particularly as children enter adolescence and their exposure to other environments and risk factors increase.

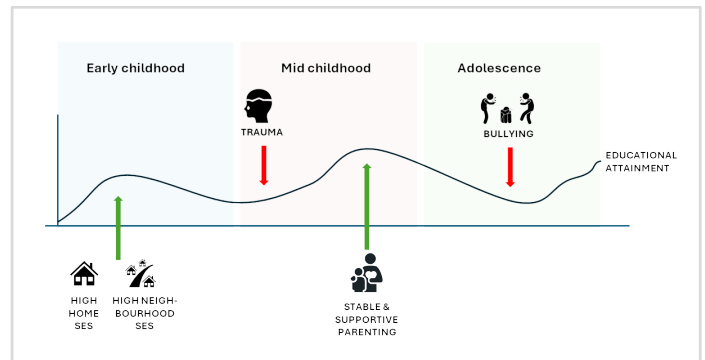
- Higher levels of both home and neighbourhood socioeconomic status were related to higher levels of educational attainment. This was more pronounced for girls in higher socioeconomic status neighbourhoods, suggesting that in resource-constrained homes, girls are more likely to be disadvantaged in their schooling.

For the most disadvantaged families and communities, social mobility through improved education unlocking employment opportunities remains a challenge, and children and families can be trapped in intergenerational cycles of poverty.

- The influence of the socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood was largely independent of the socioeconomic status of the home. So, even if a family is well-off or struggling financially, the broader

neighbourhood's socioeconomic status can still have its own separate influence on outcomes.

- Overall, the early life home environment was more strongly related to children's future outcomes than their neighbourhood. This relationship may vary depending on the types of outcomes assessed, like what we see with educational attainment and criminality. It may also vary if we assess a different exposure, for example, how early life parenting practices may influence education, or if the exposure is measured at a different time, for example, parenting practices during adolescence. For these reasons, longitudinal studies that cover a range of domains, like the Bt30 cohort, are valuable sources of data and insight into the life course.



Overall, our findings suggest that we can better understand social mobility when we explore local environments to supplement national data on socioeconomic status, education and other important statistics. Early childhood home environment significantly influences children's development, and factors such as socioeconomic security play a crucial role in educational attainment. Additionally, safe neighbourhoods and strong communities can provide protective effects for children in vulnerable households. Simultaneously investing in both the home and the community can yield benefits across various areas and amplify the positive effects.

Reference:

Early life determinants of social disparities among young adults: A longitudinal study in vulnerable communities in South Africa. *World Development*, 175, 106465. Georg Loss^{1,2,*}, Sara Naicker³, Linda Richter³, Günther Fink^{1,2}

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