

CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA: WHY THEY SHOULD BE SEEN AND HEARD?

An Analysis of Media Coverage Of Children Over The Last Five Years 2020

Written by
Lister Namumba-Rikhotso & Musa Oswald Rikhotso

Edited by William Bird

Designed by Nomshado Lubisi

MEDIAMONITORING AFRICA

Introduction



Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) has been monitoring the media's coverage of children and issues facing them for over 17 years.[1] The aim has been to determine trends in coverage and identify gaps that would inform other projects that seek to empower the media with skills and resources of better reporting on children.[2] Since the beginning of the project on monitoring of media's coverage of children, a number of analyses have been written showing how the media has been faring.[3] At the start of the project, the main challenge was that the media generally were failing to report on children or share their perspectives and views, and when they did do so, ethical considerations often went out the window.

A 2004 monitoring exercise, for instance, revealed that children were only seen in 6% of all news stories monitored.[4] This exercise also found that of the reported stories, almost 50% were on negative issues like crime (18%), war/conflict/violence (11%), child abuse (10%) and disasters/accidents (10%). In terms of portrayal and voice, the 2004 monitoring exercise revealed that children were mainly portrayed as victims at 25% and spoke in 13% of stories.

Many children have given comments on how the media has reported on them, calling for adequate reporting, more opportunities to speak in coverage of them and equal representation of children in rural and urban areas and, of boys and girls.[5] These children and more, have been engaged over the years by MMA to monitor how the media reports on them and give feedback to the media. For instance, in 2015 and 2019, these children presented their list of demands to media calling for better coverage and representation.[6] Have these fallen on deaf ears? Or has the South African media considered these demands and heeded the advice given by MMA on how they can better report on children?

This report will present findings from the 2020 media monitoring exercise which will be compared to findings from the 2016, 2017, and 2019 exercises. The year 2018 is excluded because there was no media monitoring done that year. MMA did however continue with its regular monitoring and analysis of reports on children.[7]

[1] https://mma-ecm.co.za/adult-monitoring/
[2] https://mma-ecm.co.za/make-abuse-disappear-online-accountability-tool/
[3] https://mma-ecm.co.za/reports/
[4] http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/ECM_FinalReport.pdf
[5] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Childrensreport2016web.pdf
[6] This list has been presented to media and is available upon request. It has also been added at the end of this report
[7]https://mma-ecm.co.za/make-abuse-disappear-online-accountability-tool/

Those commentaries indicating challenges in reporting or failures also offer tips on how the media can get it right next time and discuss the impact of irresponsible reporting on children. Where possible, articles written about under that activity will be used for reference in this report.

The 2016, 2017, 2019 and 2020 monitoring results will be compared against each other to show improvement in media coverage of children or the lack thereof. Additionally, a question as to whether the Covid-19 pandemic impacted how children were reported on in 2020 will also be explored.



Methodology

This analysis covers a monitoring period of five months, from May to September, 2020. To collect articles that were used in the analysis, Dexter,[8] MMA's online media monitoring tool was used and keywords, learner/pupil, child/children, minor, baby, toddler, infant, teenager were inputted in the tool to scrape data. All those articles that did not relate to children were removed from the analysis. A total of 12, 693 stories were gathered and of those, 1, 710 were about children.

The stories were collected from 12 online "print" media.[9] Earlier monitoring exercises, some of whose results are discussed in this report used to see a total of 18 media monitored. This number has reduced because broadcast media and those media that are no longer in existence like The New Age have been excluded from the monitoring. The reason for the exclusion of broadcast media is because all the monitoring is now done online using Dexter which currently only scrapes articles from online media.

After the collection of the articles, a team of trained and experienced media monitors looked through the data and monitored using a set criteria that checks things like; topic discussed in the story, whether children are speaking, the role the children occupy in coverage, how the children are portrayed, the children's gender, the quality of the information in terms of, for example, whether an article is in-depth or discusses relevant legislation and policies, whether the children's rights are respected etc. The rights that MMA monitors in an article about children are rights to participation, freedom of expression, privacy and dignity. The best interest of the children as supported by Section 28.2 of the South African Bill of Rights of the Constitution is also monitored. Findings on these are presented and discussed in the report

DEXTER
MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA INITIATIVE

[8] Access to Dexter can be granted upon request.
[9] Sowetan, Daily Sun, Cape Argus, Cape Times, The Citizen, Mail and Guardian, The Star, The Saturday Star, Sunday Times, Sunday Independent, Business Day, City Press

Findings

Children's Stories

The number of stories on children from all the scraped articles was analysed in order to determine how much space is allocated to children in media coverage. This is important because it paints a picture of whether children and issues facing them are given priority by the media.

The results below show that there has been an increase in coverage between 2016 (6%) and 2020 (13%), with the data more than doubling. In terms of actual numbers, the 2016 data had a total of 74, 647 stories of which only 4, 479 were about children while in 2020, the total number of stories recorded was 12, 693 with only 1, 710 being about children. The reason the total number of all stories for 2016 is higher is because as explained in the methodology, more media were monitored then compared to 2020. Indication from the 2018 daily media monitoring is that in that year, coverage of children was significant enough to mean the line in the graph below maintained an upward trend. The year 2018 saw a lot of media coverage on issues such as bullying[10] and school violence between teachers and pupils[11] as well as among pupils.[12]

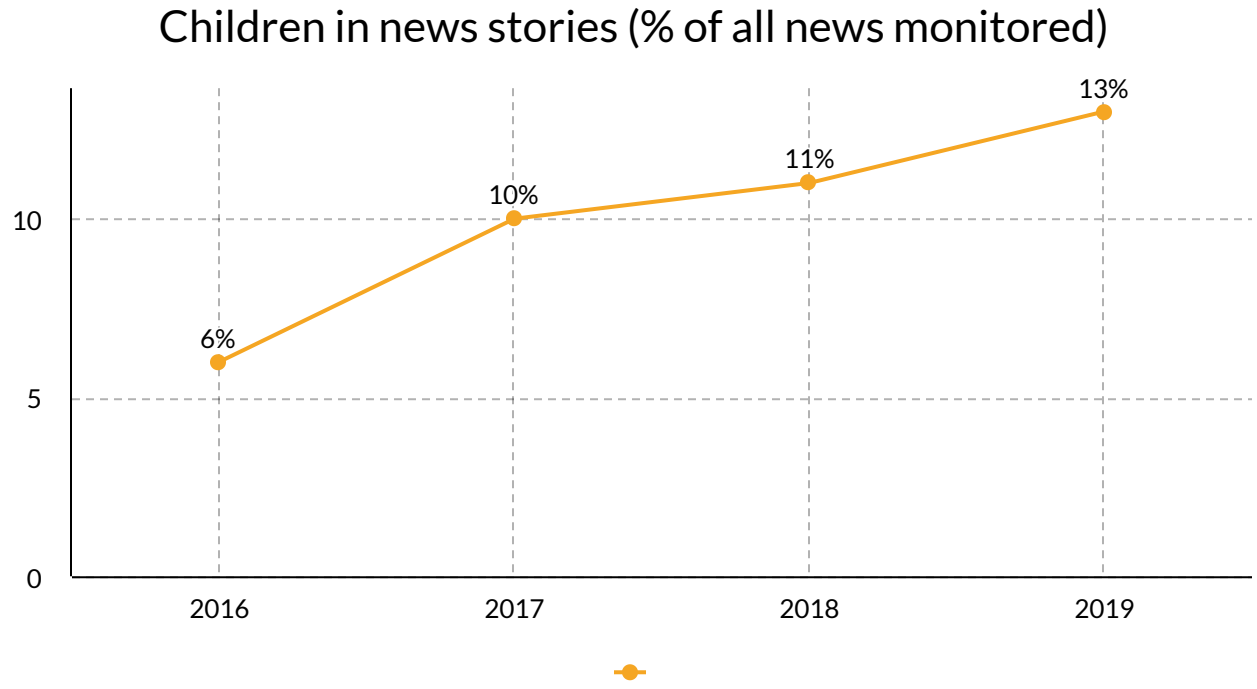


Figure 1: children in news stories (% of all news monitored)
Note: No data collected in 2018

[10] https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2018-09-29-parent-opens-case-over-bullying/
[11] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Sowetan_25092018_P2.jpg
[12] https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/cape-pupils-in-hot-water-after-attack-on-classmate-goes-viral-13523159

The progressive increase over the years can be attributed to many factors such as increase in reporting of child kidnappings and abductions, child abuse, rape, bullying and violence in schools. As can be seen in the graph above, the biggest increase in coverage since 2016 was in 2020 at 13%. This could be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic coverage which included significant coverage on the closure of schools and their reopening.

Further, the ongoing transition to digital publishing may also have resulted in an increase of stories on children. Online platforms allow the media to continuously publish stories when there is a need to publish or when breaking a news story without waiting for the next day to print. Another likely contribution to the increase had been the focus by government and civil society, echoed on social media of gender-based violence and child abuse.

MMA has observed that coverage of gender-based violence and child abuse is no longer isolated to a short period around national Women's Day and the 16 Days of Activism campaign but is reported on an ongoing basis. While this continued increase in coverage of children in the media is commendable, the fact that children and issues facing them are still only at 13% is concerning. This is more concerning when it is considered that children make up 37% of the entire South African population according to Statistics South Africa's 2020 mid-year data.[13]

While it is not suggested that media afford the same levels of coverage to children's proportion of the population, it does indicate a significant gap and oversight in covering a deeply marginalised group of people. The low levels of coverage tends to perpetuate a stereotype that children are not important enough to be reported on. Further, if the media continues to neglect children, issues facing the children are also less likely to grab the attention of policy makers. Children face significant hurdles and much needs to be done to address the needs of our most vulnerable. MMA asked a group of children to draw posters of issues facing children in South Africa from their own perspectives and issues such as hunger, lack of education, abuse, rape and discrimination [and inequality] were highlighted as key challenges faced by children.[14]

If children's issues continue to be neglected by the media and policy makers, South Africa will face a reality where challenges of crime, hunger, inequality and poor education are deeper, more protracted and at a greater scale. Children's issues are not just important for our future, they can help ensure we have a more stable future with active citizens who are healthy, have their needs met and who can then reach their potential.

"***Thirteen percent of children's stories shows a headway but it is not enough. We need to have more coverage … At the moment, we are not [being given] the right amount of coverage***," Kabir Budlender, Webranger 2020.

[13] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022020.pdf
[14] https://mma-ecm.co.za/challenges-facing-children-in-south-africa/

Percentages of children's stories per media



The table below shows the list of media monitored over the five years and also how much each media reported on children. All the media that have been monitored over the monitoring period are listed whether now defunct or not. The idea to monitor individual media performance is so as to gauge the amount of attention allocated to children by that media.

	2016	2017	2019	2020
Business Day	1%	*	*	1%
Cape Argus	6%	18%	15%	21%
Cape Times	5%	10%	16%	24%
City Press	4%	1%	6%	6%
Daily Sun	15%	23%	16%	15%
M&G	11%	11%	3%	16%
Saturday Star	2%	15%	10%	7%
Sowetan	11%	15%	10%	17%
Sunday Times	6%	12%	*	5%
Sunday World	2%	13%	*	*
The Citizen	3%	9%	6%	13%
The New Age	6%	14%	*	*
The Star	4%	13%	19%	18%
The Sunday Independent	3%	*	9%	3%
The Times	8%	15%	*	*

Note: *This media was not monitored that year or no longer exists.
Figure 2: Percentage of children's stories per individual media

From the findings above, Cape Times has demonstrated the most significant increase in stories on children. The Cape Times's coverage has increased from 5% in 2016 to 24% in 2020. This significant increase in 2020 which was the highest coverage by an individual media could be attributed to the fact that during the monitoring period, the province saw a lot of coverage of crime involving children. For instance, during the monitoring period, Cape Times reported significantly on a number of children who had been shot during gang crossfires or by stray bullets.[15][16]

Another high performing media is Cape Argus which received the second highest coverage at 21% in 2020. Cape Argus is also from the Western Cape. This media's coverage of children has increased from 6% in 2016.
It is clear that over time there appears to be very few media that offer any clearly consistent effort to report on children. This is worrying given the general declining audiences and the opportunity children present for bringing young audiences to media. It is critical that deliberate efforts by individual media are made to ensure that the coverage of children's stories increases yearly. It is only by this that the overall number of children's stories in media will increase to more than the 13% recorded in 2020.

Origin of stories

The origin of the stories is monitored to highlight which geographical areas are given priority by the media and consequently, show which ones are neglected. In order to show which provinces were overrepresented in terms of coverage of children, the population of children in all nine provinces of South Africa was also analysed. The results below indicate that the majority of stories on children has over the five year monitoring period continued to come from Gauteng and Western Cape with the 2020 data at 29% and 38% respectively. These two provinces always constitute over 50 percent of the coverage while the remaining seven provinces share the less than 50 percent of coverage remaining.

The children's population in Western Cape has remained at 10% over the five years, thus, to have a coverage share of 38% in 2020 (and 20%, 32% and 30% in 2016, 2017 and 2019 respectively) suggests children in the province are overrepresented. An example of a province that is underrepresented and has been for the last five years, is Eastern Cape which has a population of children of between 13% and 14% over the five years and yet its coverage has remained between 4% and 8%. As one of the most under-developed provinces where children face even greater challenges and deeper inequalities, media have a particular responsibility to bring to the fore the issues the children are facing.

[15] https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/protests-after-kraaifontein-girl-9-dies-after-being-hit-in-gang-crossfire-50892087
[16] https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/teenage-girl-13-wounded-in-gang-crossfire-in-eerste-river-539a28cc-ad6f-4133-b3e9-7215a4a68411

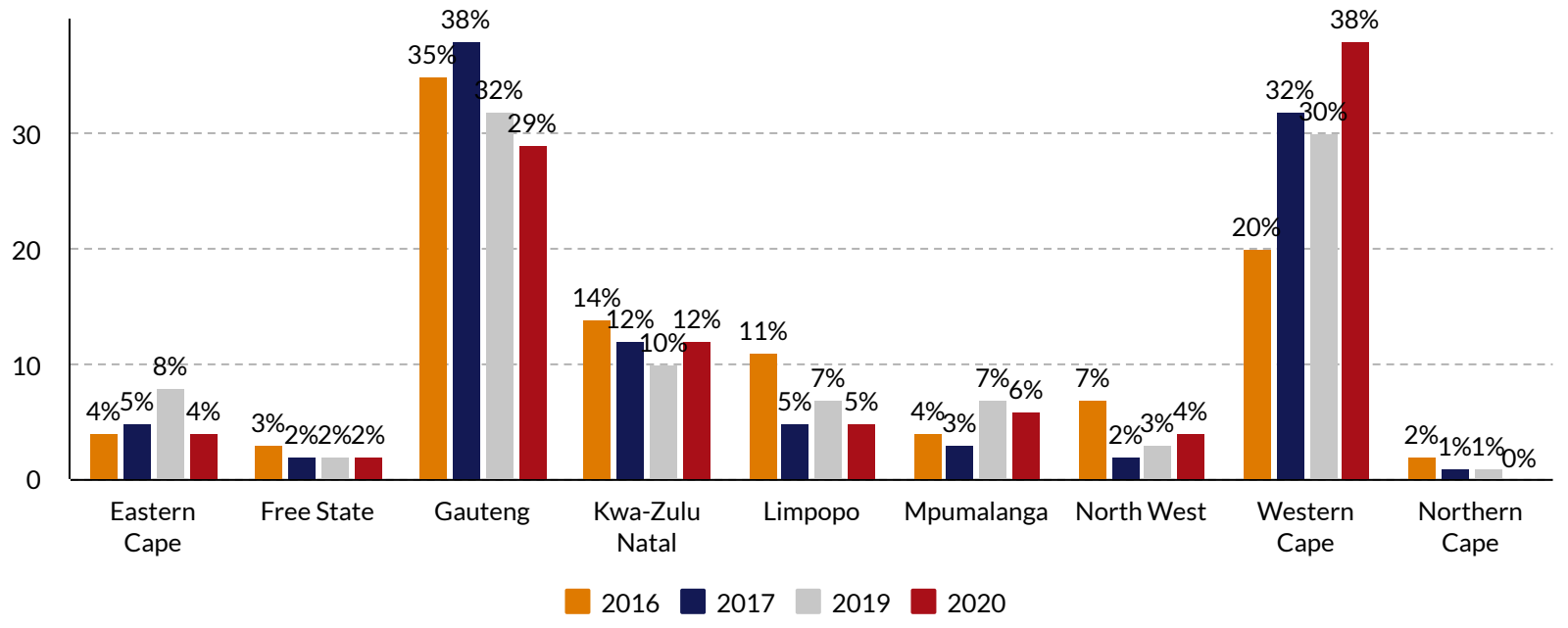


Figure 3: Origin of stories

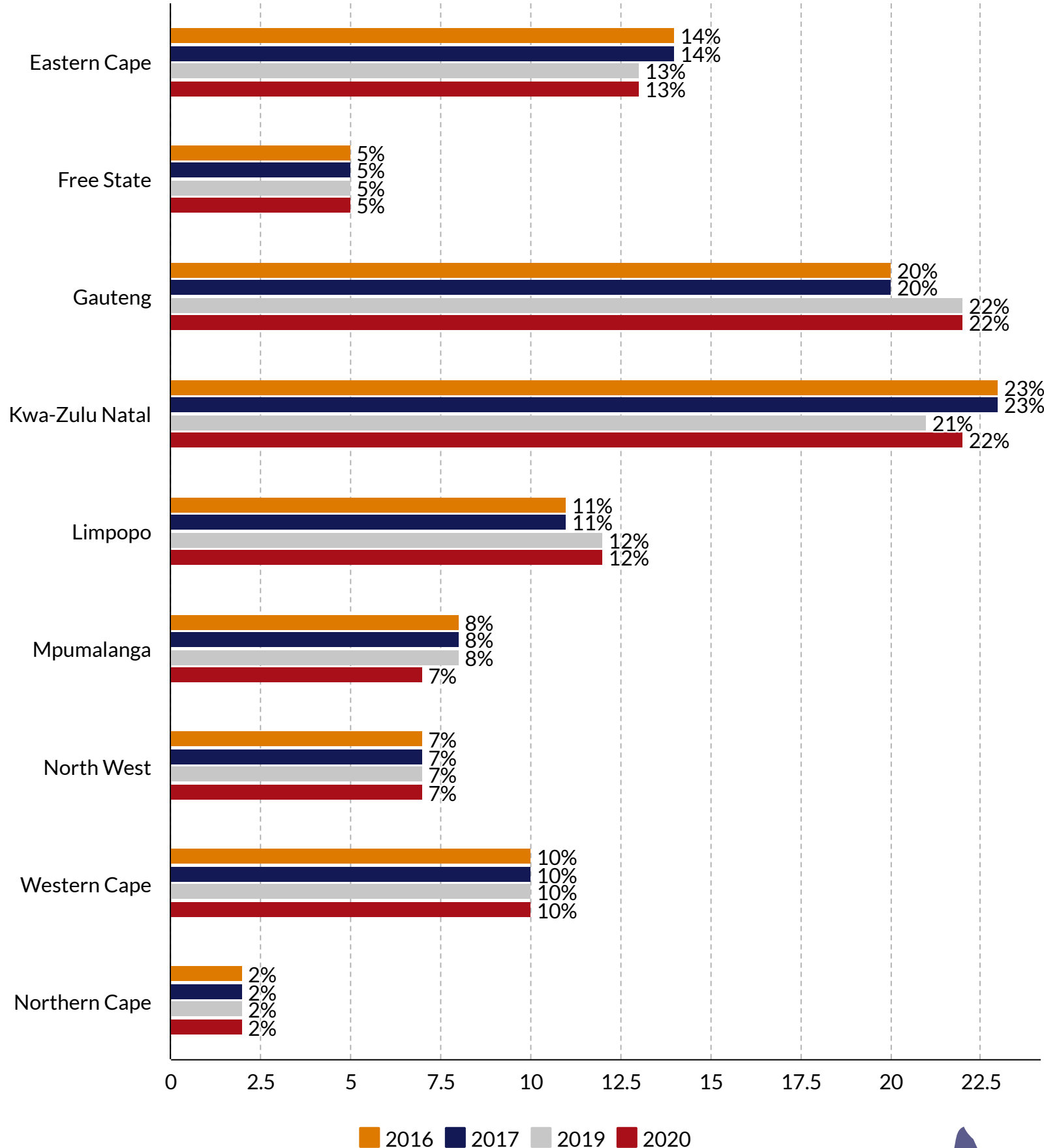
While the charts clearly demonstrate the inequity of coverage of children across our provinces, it is not at all surprising. In almost every one of MMA's media monitoring projects, media coverage on any issue is always dominated by Gauteng, Western Cape and KZN, with the other provinces trailing. A central reason for this is that most media tend to be located in Gauteng, the Western Cape, and KZN. Also as the most urban and wealthy provinces, together with access to more resources, most stories tend to focus on these provinces. The media in South Africa has continuously been affected by shrinking newsrooms due to limited resources[17] and this was made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 which saw a lot of media being affected. As a result of these challenges, it is possible that many media could not afford to send journalists to other provinces to cover issues facing children there.

While the reasons for the underreporting of a majority of provinces seem understandable, they should not be used as excuses for not fairly representing the children in these provinces. Journalists need to be more innovative and use means including technology to report on children and their issues from other provinces. The repercussion of underrepresentation on children's issues in the media could have a serious impact on the development and the well-being of children from various provinces.

Disproportionatly high reporting of children's issues in the media in Gauteng and Western Cape means that the children in these provinces are likely to get better service delivery because the people in power are more likely to be aware of the challenges that they experience. Media should seek to ensure they afford coverage to the most marginalised and particularly those for whom redress and action will be even more challenging.

[17] https://journalism.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/State-of-the-Newsroom-report-2018_updated-20190709.pdf

CHILDREN'S POPULATION



Top 10 topics

what are the stories that mention children about?



Analysing which topics are frequently reported on in the media helps determine which issues involving children are considered newsworthy by the media. This is important in that it assists in understanding what issues and areas are considered to be most important or concerning. These in turn offer some indication as to the state of governance and the media. As will be explored in this section, our main finding is that the topics that the media tend to focus on are usually guided by events, and not issues. This can be seen in the charts that follow, where across the four years being analysed, Education and Crime feature in the top three most common topics. In 2016, the media was dominated by coverage of the Vuwani protests in Limpopo which saw violence and over 25 schools torched and shut.[18] These protests went on for three months[19] and grabbed media's attention. Thus while education was a key topic, the thrust of the stories was in fact on the failure to provide education and on violence that resulted from protests and schools being closed.

Crime as a topic has always been among the top three of the list but between 2017 and 2019, it topped the list. To a degree this is hardly surprising as we know from the SAPS figures that crimes against children are unacceptably high. For example, in the 2018/19 SAPS figures, 1, 014 children were murdered. There were over 45, 000 cases of assault and sexual offences on children. There were also prominent cases on crimes against children reported in the period, including the Van Breda murder trial. Coverage of trials also resulted in the Justice System moving up from the bottom of the top 10 list to second and third place in 2017 and 2019 respectively.

In 2020, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, one would expect that Health would top the list because of all the coverage that the media focused on during this year (the media focused on reporting on Covid-19 as MMA found in the series of analyses published[20]) but this was not so. Health, which has tended to range between fourth and sixth position on the list during the monitoring period, understandably moved up to third position in 2020. What topped the list in 2020, however, was Education and this was because of all the debates/discussions on school closures and re-openings that the media constantly reported on. When the government announced the national lockdown, schools were also closed and the public and other interested stakeholders began debating the move. In the end, between March and September, 2020, schools had been closed then re-opened(select grades), closed then re-opened again.

[18] https://ewn.co.za/topic/vuwani-protests
[19] https://section27.org.za/2017/09/vuwani-protest-a-threat-to-learners-right-to-basic-education/
[20] https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Covid-19-Media-Coverage-1-1-1.pdf

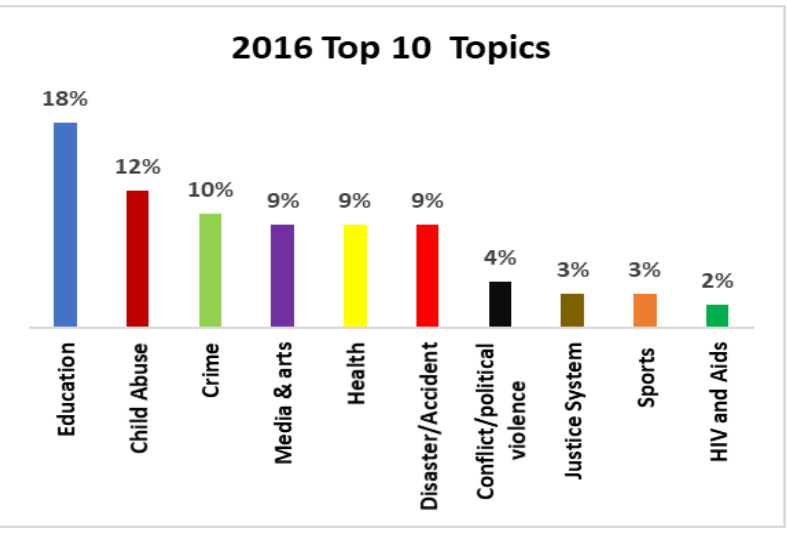


Figure 5: 2016 Top 10 topics

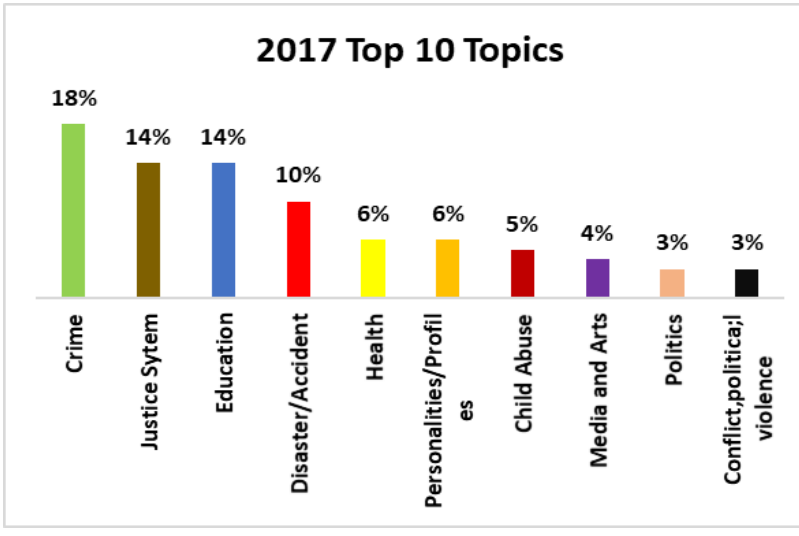


Figure 6: 2017 Top 10 topics

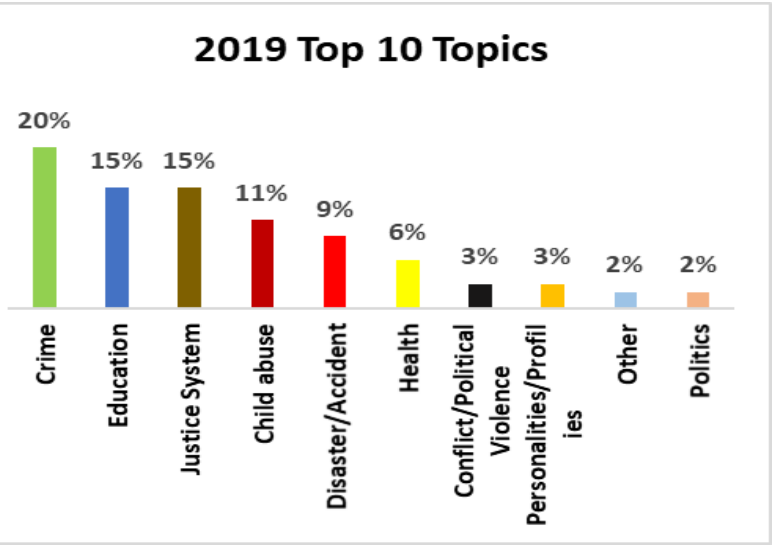


Figure 7: 2019 Top 10 topics

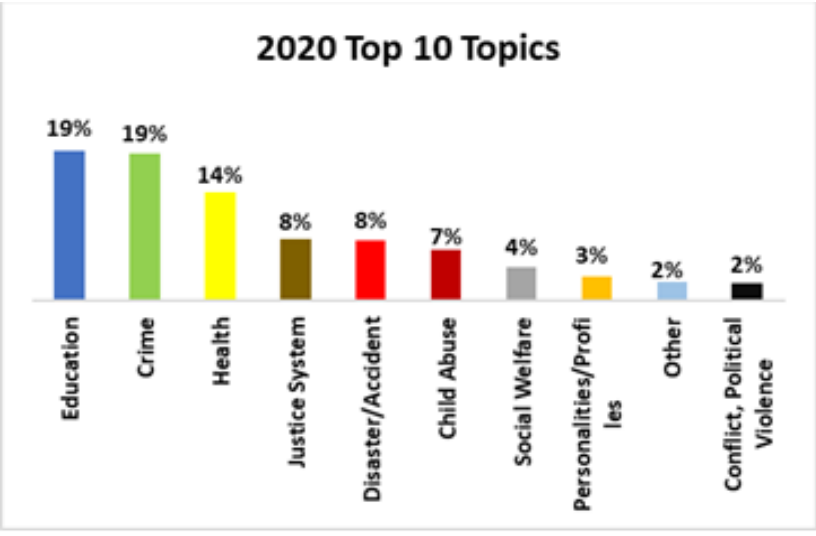


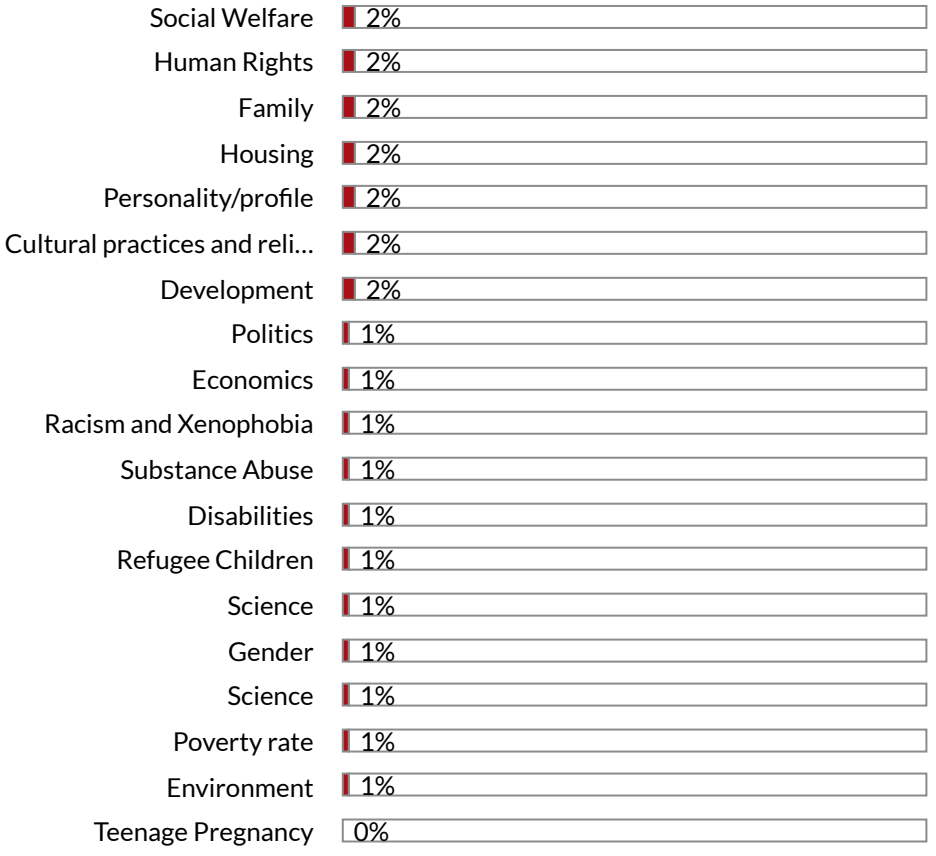
Figure 8: 2020 Top 10 topics

The dominance of the few topics means that other topics tend to be neglected. Media should be encouraged to diversify the issues they report on.

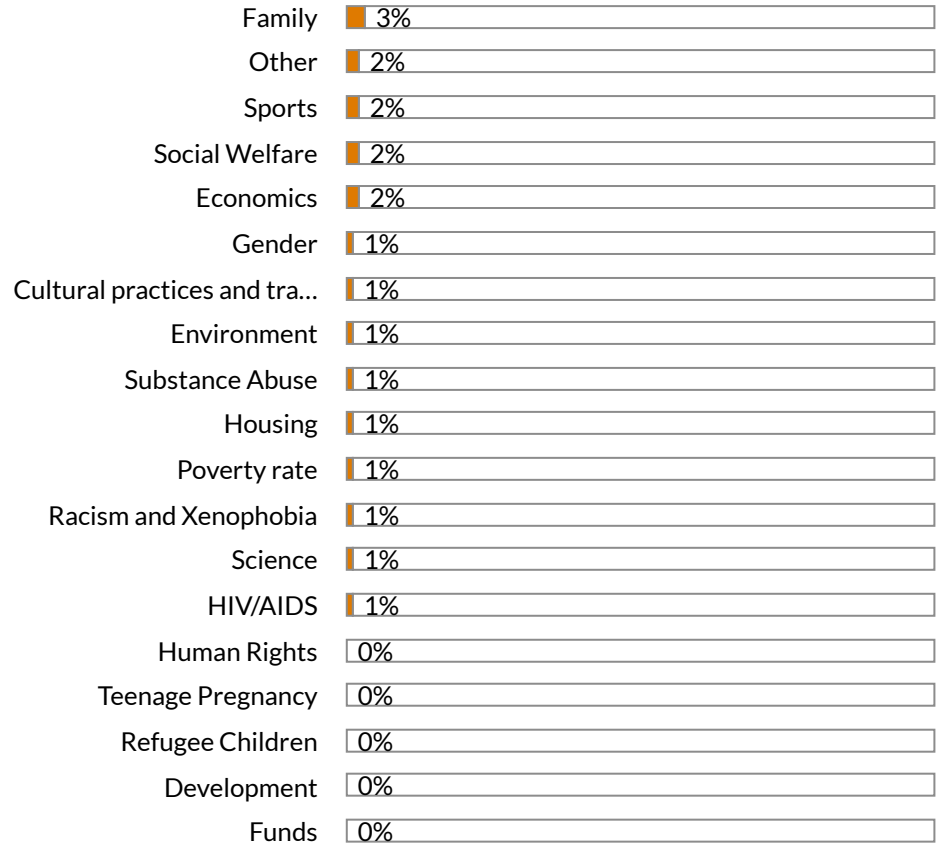
The figure below shows the list of topics that receive minimal attention. Topics such as Racism and Xenophobia, Poverty, Housing, Substance Abuse, Teenage Pregnancy and Disability etc have continued to receive 2% and less over the five years. What is even more concerning is that positive topics such as Science and Sports also feature on this list despite having a lot of children excelling in these fields, as revealed by our daily media monitoring.[21]

[21] https://mma-ecm.co.za/category/get-glad/

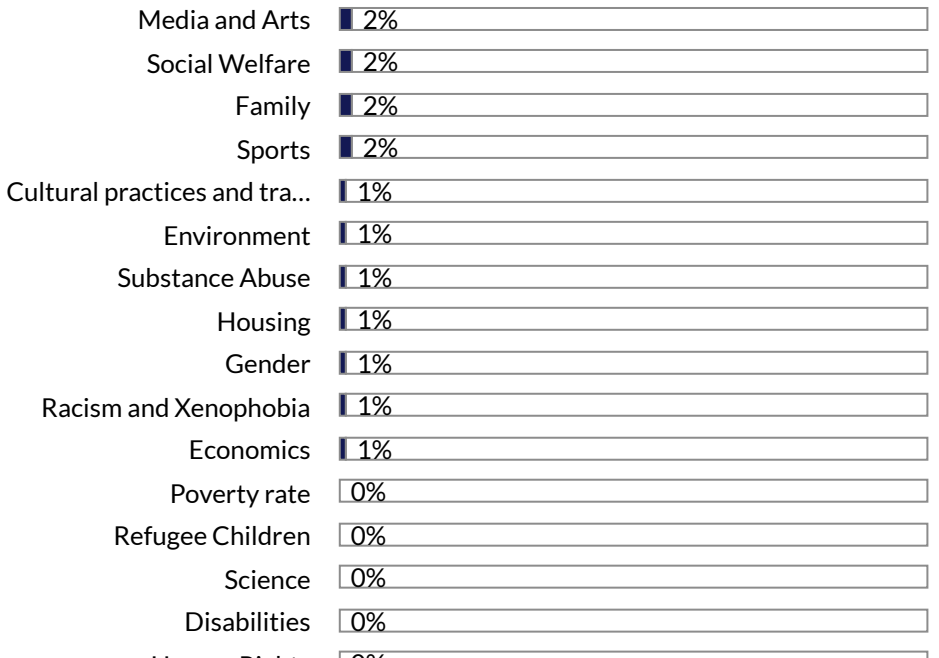
LESS COVERED TOPICS IN 2016



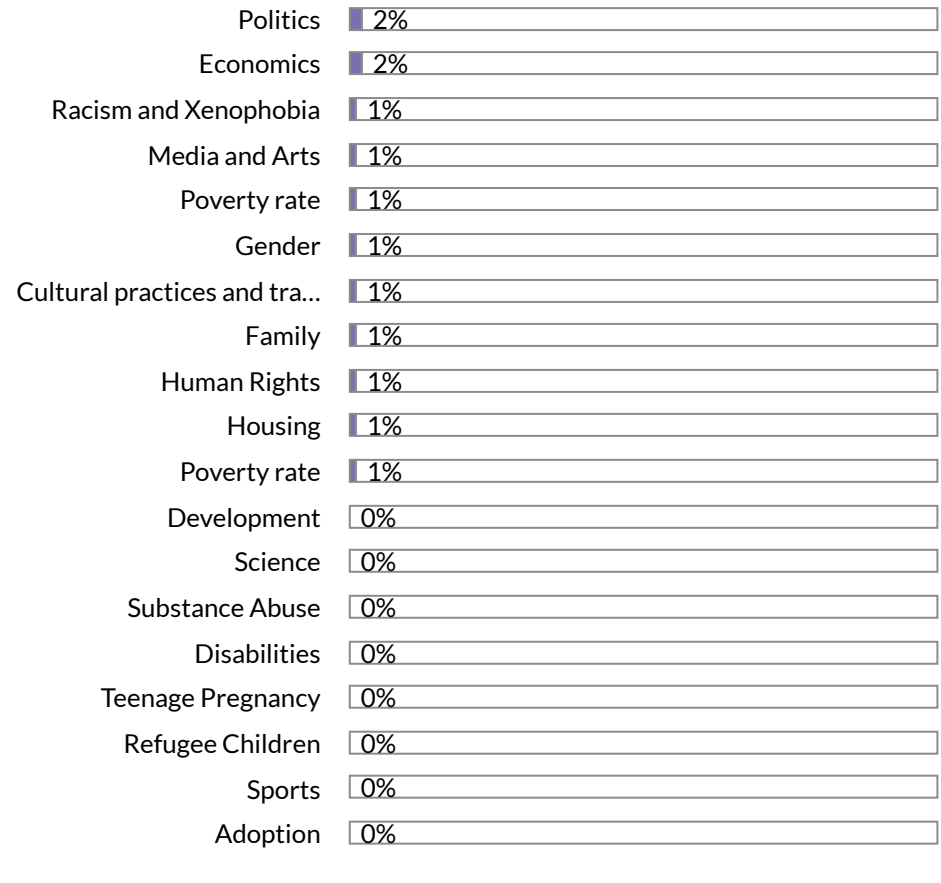
LESS COVERED TOPICS IN 2017



LESS COVERED TOPICS IN 2019



LESS COVERED TOPICS IN 2020



What roles do children occupy in stories?

MMA monitors and analyses how the media portray children in coverage. This is done to determine whether the media perpetuate certain stereotypes about children.
As has been explained in the section above, 2016 saw a dominance of coverage of the Vuwani protests in Limpopo which resulted in the topic, Education, being top of the list of topics that the media reported on. With this, one would expect that the role, Learner, would be top of the list of top five roles the media use to portray children. This was not the case as can be seen in the figure below showing the 2016 data.

The role, Learner was third on the list in 2016 as well as in 2020, both years that had Education topping the list. The most likely explanation for this is that media more often than not, portray children as just 'children' without any clear attributable role. While it may be argued that there is nothing wrong with portraying children as just children, MMA argues that portraying children just as 'children' is not empowering, denies children's diversity and suggests they are all the same with little agency.

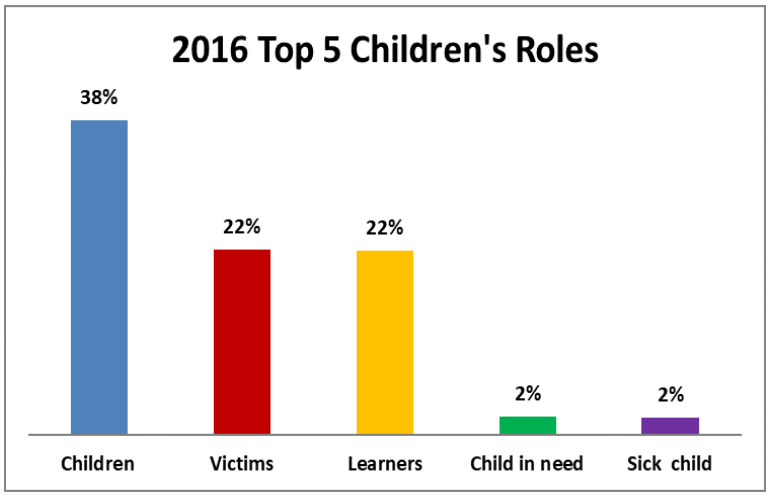


Figure 9: 2016 Top 5 Children's Roles

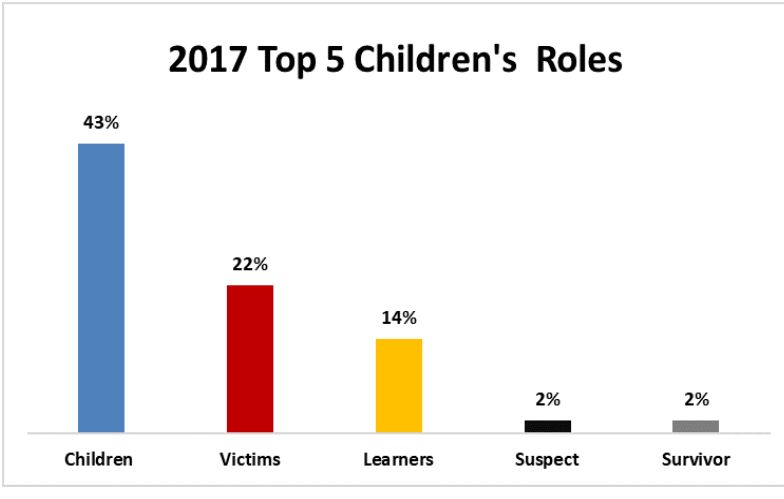


Figure 10: 2017 Top 5 Children's Roles

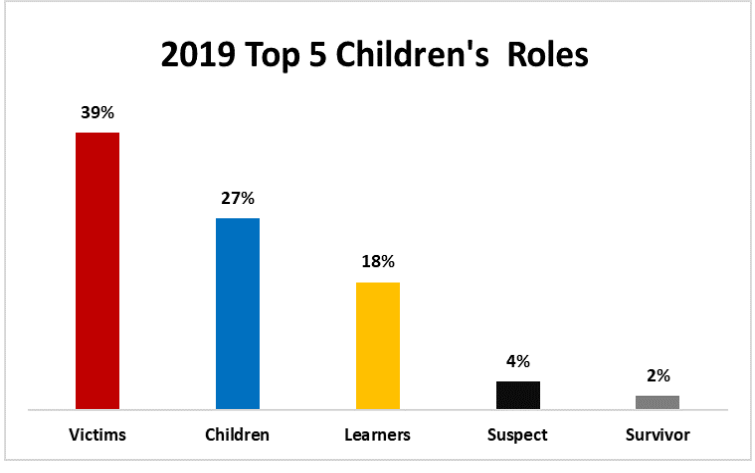


Figure 11: 2019 Top 5 Children's Roles

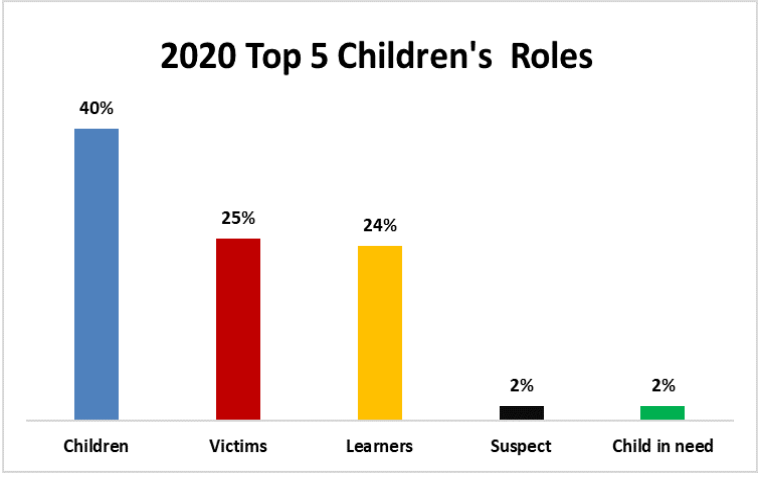


Figure 12: 2020 Top 5 Children's Roles

The continued presence of topics like Crime, Justice System, Child Abuse, Disaster/Accident and Conflict/Political Violence on the top 10 list shows that 50% and sometimes more than half of media's coverage of children only occurs when bad things happen to children and they are either victims, witnesses or suspects. As such, roles such as Victim will continue to have a strong appearance on the list coming in second in 2016, 2017 and 2020. The year 2019 had the role, Victim on top of the list. This is because in 2019, the topic topping the list was Crime and children were largely identified as victims in this year.

The consequence of constantly portraying children as victims or just as children is that the stereotype about being helpless or without agency will continue to be perpetuated. Further, if children are consistently and disproportionately placed under certain, and especially negative roles in the news, this can have an impact on society's view of them and their abilities.

"We don't deny bad things happen to children but there should be less stories where children are shown as powerless victims, criminals or children in poverty," Solukuhle Ndlovu, Webranger 2019.

The presence of the role, Survivor, even though it was at 2% in 2017 and 2019, suggests a consciousness in media about ensuring children are not portrayed as helpless victims but also as resilient and survivors. Similarly to topics, there are roles that are less visible in the media. Roles such as Hero, Sportsperson, Achievers (like a Mathematics and Science Wiz) continue to be neglected. These neglected roles indicate low levels of curiosity when reporting on children.

It is important to highlight that over the full five year period, the top five roles list has constituted over 70% of the overall roles children occupy. The lack of diversity in roles suggest not only lack of diverse coverage but also that few new approaches are taken to show diverse children. Our work with children reminds us how children want to be portrayed in different roles, so that they can see themselves and their issues reflected in the media. Portraying children in empowering roles such as Survivor, Achiever etc might potentially aid in the healing process of those children that experienced a traumatic ordeal and enhance their sense of worth, respectively.

"We would like to hear more about heroes, survivors, active citizens, sports and children and their achievements," Paballo Manyelo, Webranger 2019.

"Media need to speak to children more when reporting on them because children's voices are not in the media and we want to hear them," Tawananyasha Murombo, Webranger 2020.

Section 16 of the South African Constitution states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression." The Section goes to state that this includes the "freedom of the press and other media" and the "freedom to receive or impart information or ideas". There are also a number of frameworks that provide for this right, specifically the children's right to freedom of expression. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children[22] (ACRWC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[23] (UNCRC) which South Africa ratified in 2000 and 1996 respectively provide for the children's right to freedom of expression. These go further to ask states to ensure that children enjoy this right.

Duty bearers who include the media, should ensure that this right is enjoyed by all children, an example of on how to give children voices reporting , The Star 14/08/2020 " Blind teen among top in maths Olympiad". The media, in their coverage of children should include views from children not only to ensure stories are told with children's perspectives but to also empower the children. An example of media failing to give voices to children, Cape Argus 01/09/2020 " No major problems' as grades 5 and 8 return"

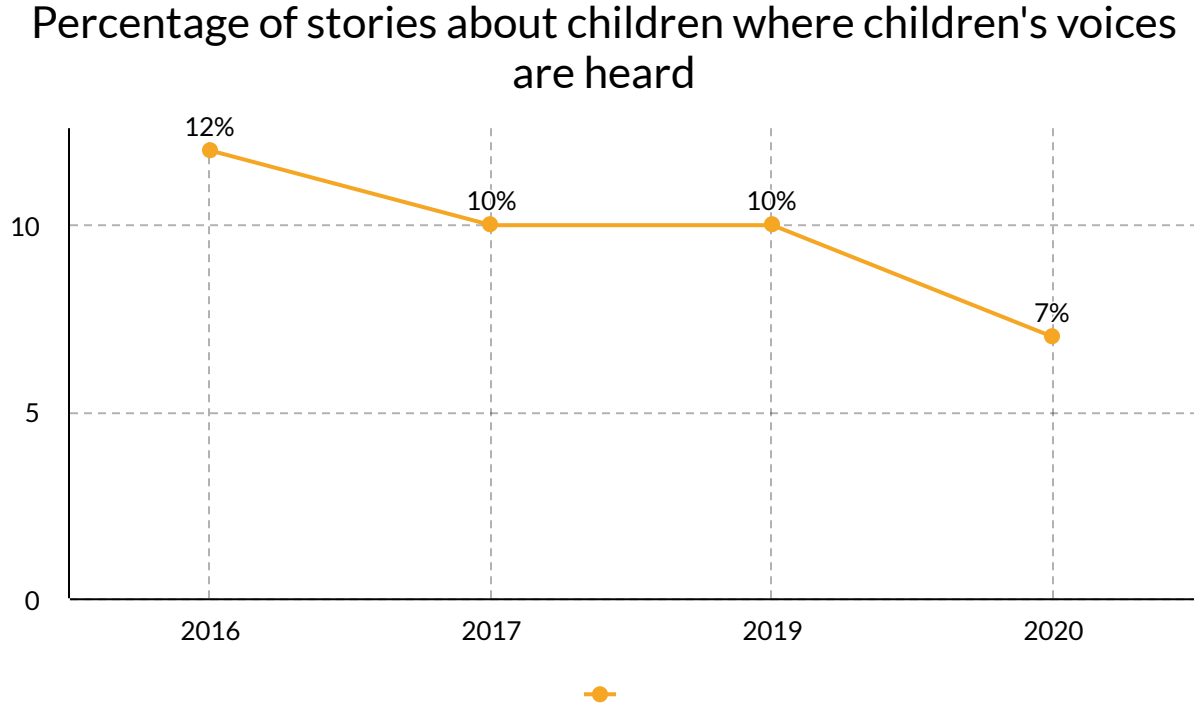


Figure 13: Percentage of stories about children where children's voices are heard.

[22] https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/afr_charter_rights_welfare_child_africa_1990.pdf
[23] https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text

While children's stories increased by more than double between 2016 and 2020 as has been seen above, the number of stories that have children's voices has decreased significantly. In 2016, children's voices were heard in 12% of the stories in which they appeared. This reduced to 7% in 2020. Such decrease is concerning because it demonstrates a general trend in media reporting to access less and less people in stories. On a fairly basic level, it makes for people's voices to be heard on matters that directly affect them. The same holds true for children. Children should be afforded a platform to add their voices to coverage that is about or affects them when it is in their best interests. MMA has found that "children reflect and highlight varied experiences and views from different economic and cultural backgrounds",[24] yet many media still shy away from adding their voice to coverage.

Failure to enrich stories with children's perspectives perpetuates the stereotype that children are not important enough to be heard. Additionally, this failure might result in issues facing children being neglected as the children will not have an avenue to communicate their expectations of leaders in their communities and country at large. The significant drop in children's voices in coverage could be as a result of media mostly reporting on crime and the justice system. As indicated above, even when education is the main subject, often the stories are about violence or protests. As a result, many of these stories are focused on negative events like accidents, criminal acts, violence or abuse that have happened to children. In such cases, media have thankfully tended not to access those children directly involved as it may in most cases expose the children to secondary trauma. That said, it is possible to access children on difficult issues like abuse, but speaking to abused children is almost always not the way. Nevertheless the emphasis on negative stories does mean that those children involved tend to be at greater risk and their voices are appropriately not accessed.

What the finding suggests is that the media need to be creative in how they can access children's views and voices on negative issues. Our work with children also demonstrates how they want to see and read not only about the negative issues.

"We want to see all the achievements and good things that children do. We do not want to hear more about murder, rape, abuse and crime against children," Paballo Manyelo, Webranger 2019.

"We need a good balance of negative and positive reporting on children. They both have wonderful advantages. Negative reporting shows the dark things that are being done by or to children while positive reporting inspires other children to be the best they can be and shows what kids can truly do. [Children should] given them a platform to stand on and voice their thoughts and opinions," Sokoluhle Ndlovu, Webranger 2019.

It is also worth considering that when we asked children why they read stories about child abuse, a common response was that they wanted to know what was happening so that they could help a friend or know what to do if it happened to someone they knew. In cases where access to children is a challenge or has clear ethical minefields, media need to be encouraged to contact organisations that work with children for access to children.

[24] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/mma_editorial_guideline.pdf

Children's versus Adults' voices

It is important to see who speaks in stories about children. We already know that there are very few voices of children. The figure below shows data obtained after comparing the number of articles that had children as sources and those that had adults. As can be seen, the percentage of adults speaking in articles about children has increased from 90% in 2016 to 99% in 2020.

This demonstrates that adults are almost entirely dominating voices on children's issues. In fact, as indicated from the data below, it can be deduced that children are not heard in coverage and that adults are speaking on behalf of them. The implication of having adults speak on behalf of children is that decisions will ultimately and potentially be made without a child rights angle and more likely without the children's best interest being paramount.

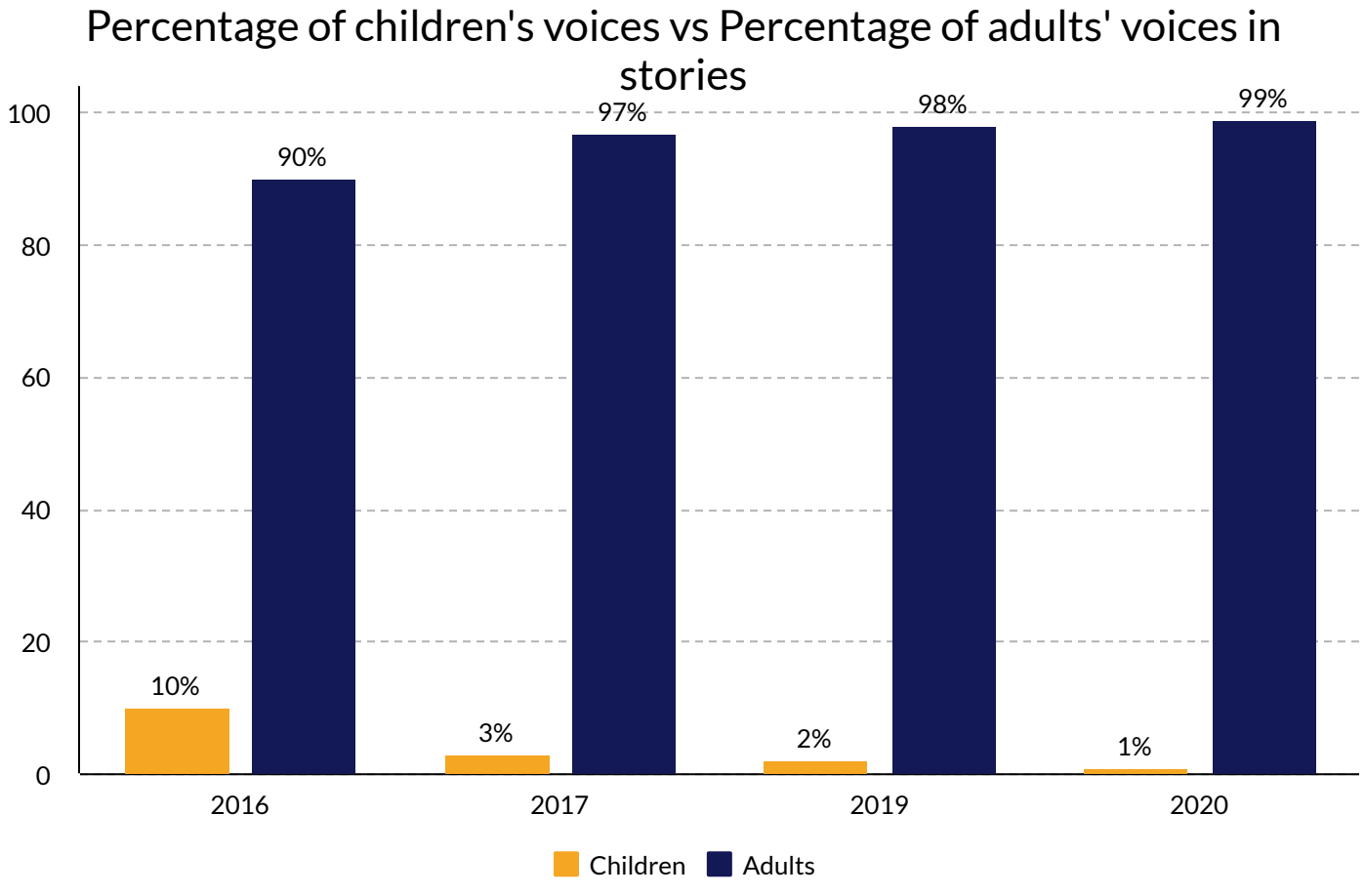


Figure 14: Percentage of Children's Voices vs Percentage of Adults' Voices in stories.

What are adults saying?

It is clear that adults are the dominating voice in the news about children as has been shown above. So what are they exactly saying? All direct and indirect quotations by adults were collected and put into a word cloud. The bigger the word, the more it was repeated in the quotations.

Usually, the most used words are related to the top topics covered. For example, school is always on the list of most used words because of the extensive coverage of Education in South Africa, as has been shown above. Covid is among the most used word of 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic that dominated media coverage in 2020 sending the topic, Health to third place on the top ten list of topics from its usual place at fifth or sixth.

The years 2017 and 2019 had Crime as a topic topping the list. This correlates with the most used words in those years which are Police, People, Children and Violence.. This might mean that the media was reporting on crime related stories where the police were speaking a lot or the coverage was mentioning that the police were investigating etc.



Figure 15: Word-cloud 2016

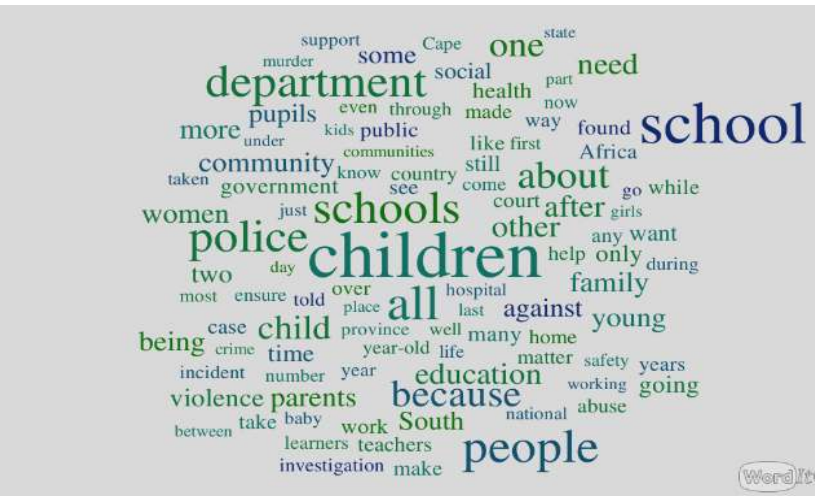


Figure 16: Word-cloud 2017

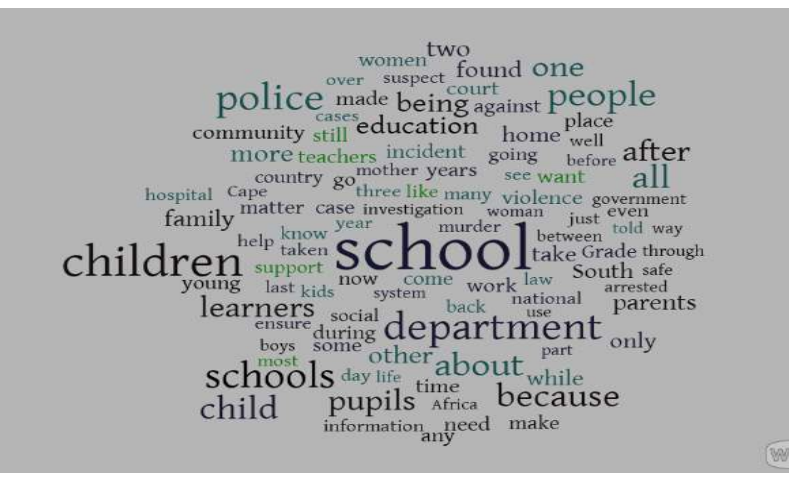


Figure 17: Word-cloud 2019

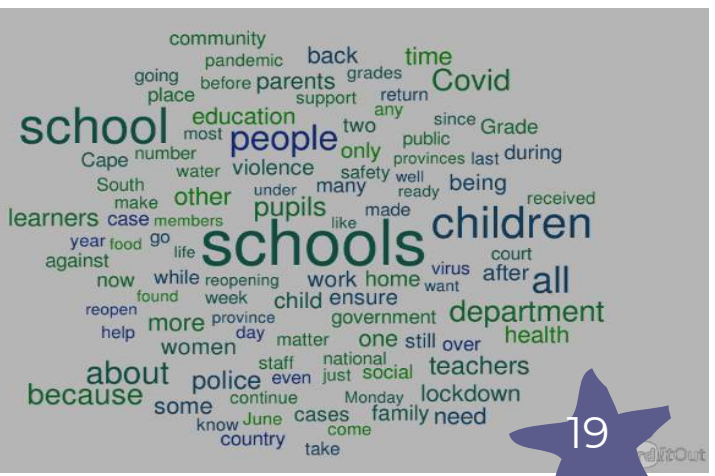


Figure 18: Word-cloud 2020

Gender: Portraying Girls and Boys

According to the United Nations Development Programmes[25] (UNDP), "gender disparities are a persistent form of inequality in very country". The UNDP go on to state that there is no country "rich or poor" that has achieved gender equality. This shows that there is a very serious issue that the entire world is grappling with that needs to be addressed. The media should play a role to help address this and this should also be reflected in their coverage of children.

MMA monitors gender to help determine how men and women, boys and girls are reported.[26] In this section, we focus on the gender dimension of the coverage of children.

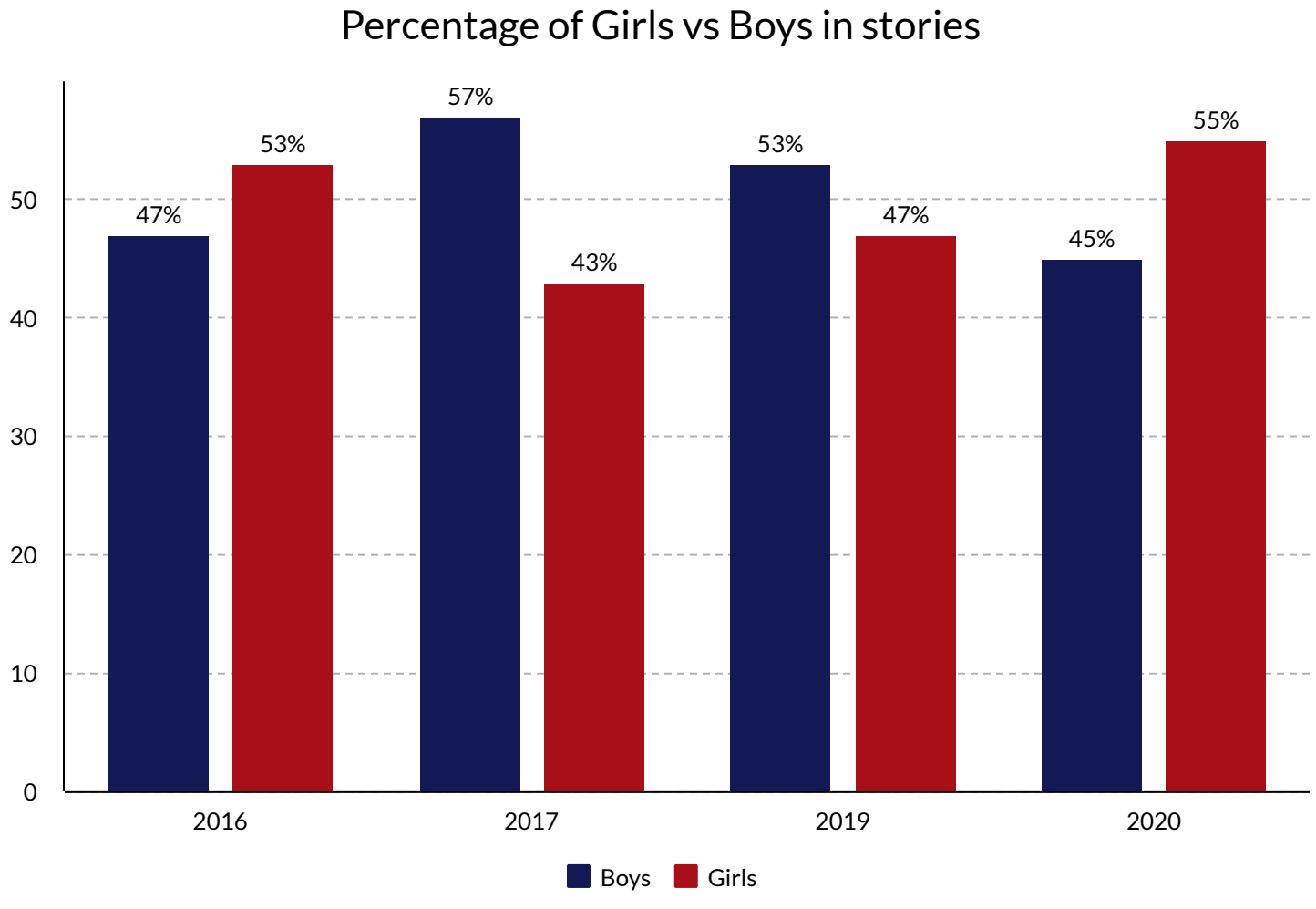


Figure 19: Boys Vs Girls

[25] http://hdr.undp.org/en/GSNI
[26]Learn more about MMA's Lens on Gender project here
https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/2020/08/09/launch-of-the-lens-on-gender-project/



As can be seen above, the South African media is doing a commendable job trying to achieve an equitable representation of boys and girls in coverage of children. Boys' representation varies between 45% (lowest in 2020) and 57% (highest in 2017) and girls between 43% (lowest in 2017) and 55% (highest in 2020).

These findings are in many respects truly extraordinary. When compared with portrayal of gender for adults, the figures are radically different. Figures from monitoring over the last National General Elections, women accounted for 20% of all voices in the media.[27] While the figures vary from around 20% to 25%, it is clear that there is nothing even vaguely approaching the more equitable levels of how children are portrayed. While it is tempting to assume that the gender power dynamic that deeply influence the patriarchal portrayal for adults doesn't apply to children, the monitoring reveals that it is not the case.

MMA's finding is that gender portrayal is directly linked to the topics covered, similar to the link between children's voice and role. In 2016 and 2020, Education topped the list of topics covered and in these same years, girls were reported on more than boys. This might mean that girls featured more in coverage of education during these two years. In 2017 and 2019, Crime as a topic topped the list and looking at the graph above, boys' representation in these years was higher than girls'.

Previously, monitoring has indicated that stories on crime and abuse involving children have girls as 'victims'. the data above seems to suggest that during the years when crime topped the list (2017 and 2019), boys featured a lot more in coverage than girls. A closer look at the data suggests that while boys have been shown as victims[28][29][30] of crime, more commonly in these stories they are identified as perpetrators.[31]

It is important for media to ensure that they strive to not only equitably report on children but be cautious in how they portray girls and boys in coverage. The shift in portrayal in stories on crime and abuse (usually it is girls who dominate as victims in such coverage) means that the notion that boys are not victims of abuse or crime was challenged in 2017 and 2019. Additionally, the idea that girls should only be reported on when they are victims of abuse or crime was challenged by the coverage of education where girls featured in 2016[32] and 2020[33] largely as just learners or excelling in various education related activities.

[27] https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019electionsFinal_v2.pdf
[28] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Sowetan_06092017_P2.jpg
[29] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Sowetan_05092017_P5.jpg
[30] https://www.heraldlive.co.za/news/2019-04-04-shot-helenvale-toddler-doing-well-in-hospital/
[31] https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/bullied-to-death-11305607
[32] http://41.77.4.164/www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/images/uploads/TNA_11042016p.9_.jpg
[33] https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/news/joburg-teen-becomes-first-blind-pupil-to-participate-in-sa-maths-olympiad--07969bf4-8419-45cd-8e5a-e861295cb107



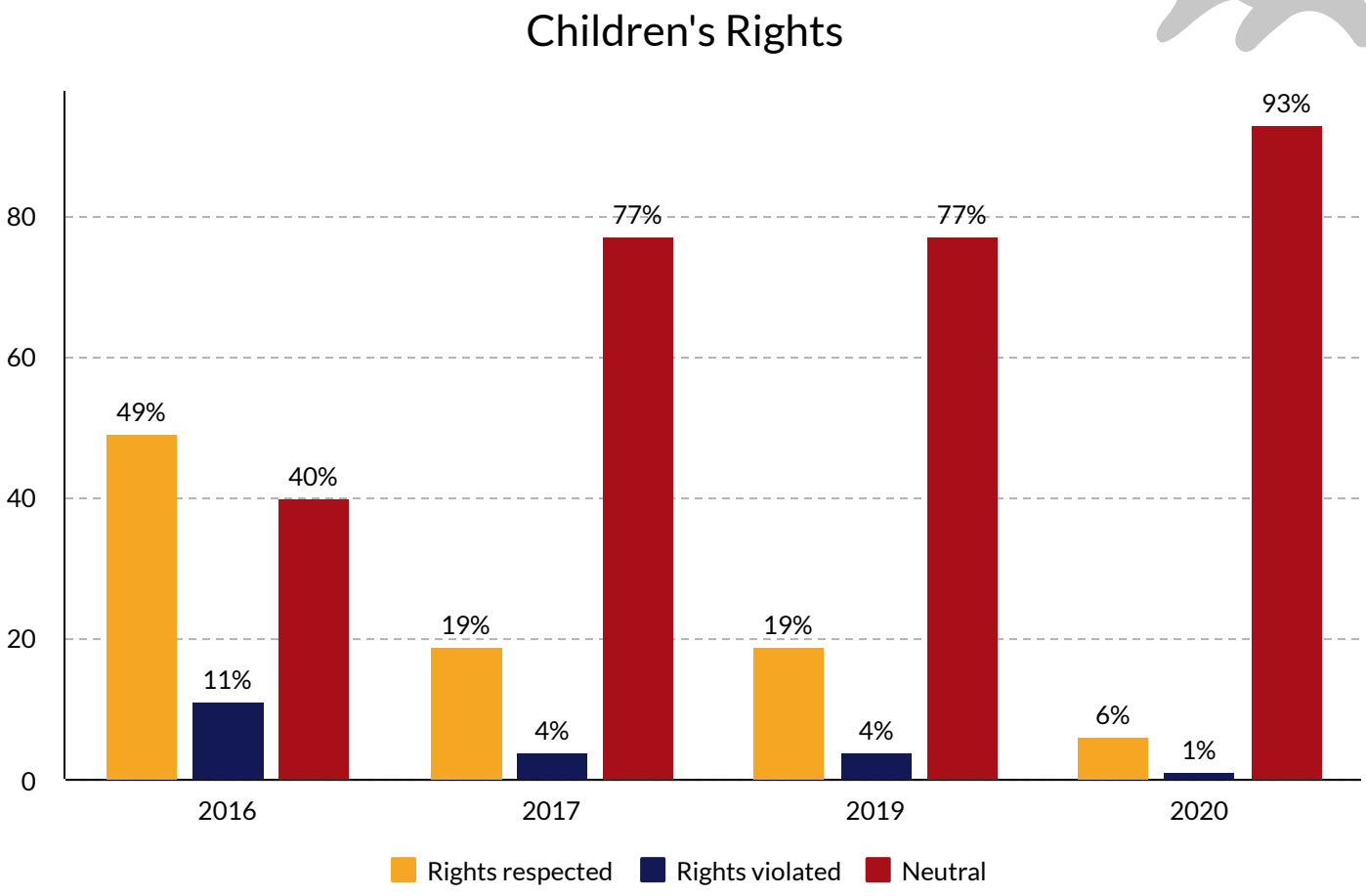
When monitoring and analysing how the South African media report on children, MMA mainly looks at the protection or violation of four children's rights namely; right to participation, right to freedom of expression, right to privacy and the right to dignity. All these rights are enshrined in the South African Constitution under Bill or Rights section 28 and/or various frameworks that South Africa signed and ratified like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[34] (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child[35] (ACRWC).

Promotion of the right to participation ensures that children are featured in the media adequately. This entails the media actively reporting on children and issues facing them. An example of where this right was promoted is in these articles which reported on children who were actively protesting the killing of Nathaniel Julies, an El Dorado teenager who was reportedly shot by the police in August, 2020.[36][37]

The promotion of the right to freedom of expression ensures that the media in their reporting of children, include children's views when it is in the best interest of those children. Ensuring that children speak in coverage of them when doing so will not subject those children to harm, will result in the increase of voices of children in coverage of them.. Examples of articles that promoted this right are one where grade seven and 12 learners spoke about their lives during the national lockdown and how they felt about going back to school when the government eased some restrictions and allowed for these two grades to return to school amid the Covid-19 pandemic[38] and, another where children who started fixing potholes in their community for free explained why they undertook the activity.[39]

The right to privacy calls for the media to report on children and protect their privacy when in instances where doing otherwise might expose the children to harm. Examples of stories where this right should be protected are stories such as those on crime where the children involved are either victims, witnesses or suspects.[40] The promotion of the right to dignity entails the media protecting children from instances where reporting might subject them to harm such as ridicule. This calls for the media to report on children in a dignified manner. An example of an article where this right should be protected is one reporting on a child at the centre of a child maintenance dispute.[41]

[34] https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text
[35] https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/afr_charter_rights_welfare_child_africa_1990.pdf
[36] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Saturday-Star.jpg
[35] https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-09-02-watch-children-living-with-down-syndrome-call-for-justice-for-murdered-teen-nathenil-julies/
[36] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Saturday-Star.jpg
[37] https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-09-02-watch-children-living-with-down-syndrome-call-for-justice-for-murdered-teen-nathenil-julies/
[38] https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/tshwane-pupils-speak-up-about-going-back-to-school-48509307?fbclid=IwAR1iWR_UXK1gKebbdBYz-vUNyyIP5vxDAyURgnELWwnU9VsSi-TnccaaZC0
[39] https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/watch-cape-town-teens-fixing-communitys-roads-one-pothole-at-a-time-6f2e1759-defc-4095-b26b-129cd62ffc69
[40] https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/teen-chased-with-pitbull-beaten-with-spade-drenched-in-disinfectant-then-held-captive-1b7f5987-8695-4edc-ab85-c429a7827b5e
https://sundayworld.co.za/news/mother-of-a-child-stabbed-in-the-eye-while-at-school-left-to-fend-for-herself/
[41] https://mma-ecm.co.za/journalists-should-exercise-extra-precaution-when-reporting-on-children/



The figure above shows how media has been faring in terms of promotion or violation of these mentioned children's rights. While checking for promotion and violation, MMA has also been coming across a significant amount of articles that are 'neutral'. This indicates that those articles neither clearly violated nor clearly promoted the children's rights. While this may seem like a very positive finding at first glance, it does little for the advocacy on reporting on children, and recognising their rights. Neutral articles suggest that the media merely reported on a children's issue without delving deep enough to allow for the promotion of the right to freedom of expression etc. These kinds of articles are usually event based and mostly offer basic context. An example of such an article is one which reported on four children from Port Alfred who reportedly saved an 11-year-old child who was swept away by sea currents.[42] The journalist did not include the voice of the "heroes" to the article. What makes the article neutral is that it neither clearly promotes nor clearly violates any right.

As can be seen from the figure above, the number of articles that are neutral has increased by more than double from the 40% recorded in 2016 to the 93% recorded in 2020. The implication of having a great amount of coverage on children that is neutral is that children's issues will continue to be regarded as not important enough to be in-depth, ethical and/or with children's voices.

[42] https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/2020-08-23-teen-heroes-save-child-from-drowning-in-eastern-cape/

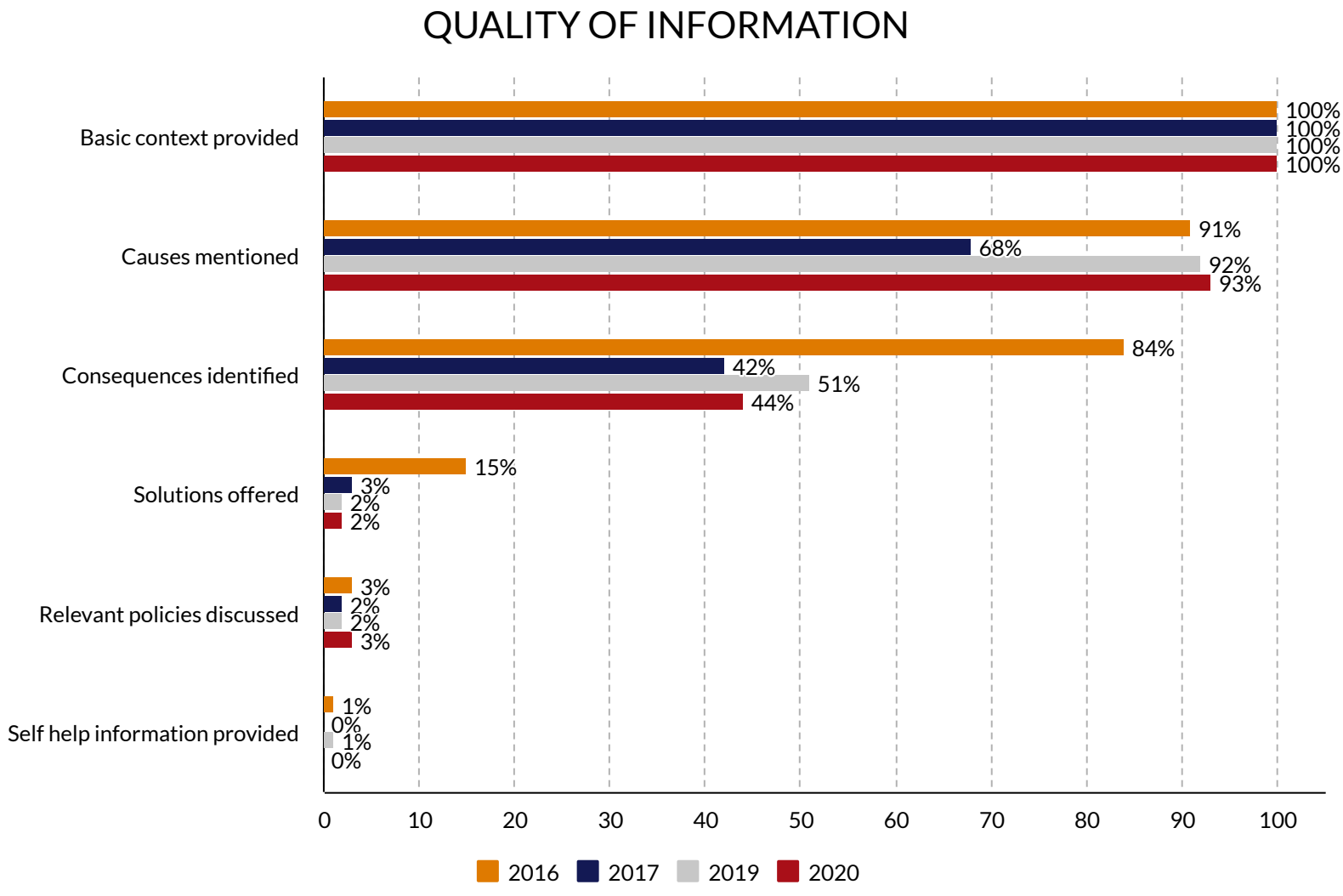
Articles that clearly promote children's rights have reduced significantly from the 49% recorded in 2016 to a mere 6% in 2020. This is a huge setback in the fight for adequate and ethical reporting of children in the media, and for respecting the rights of one of the most marginalised groups in our country. The decrease could be because some journalists have become relaxed in their reporting of children in terms of adherence to ethical and legal frameworks on reporting on children. Another factor may be that the media are using less creative ways of reporting on children and so resort to basic context reporting (explained in the section below) that ends up pushing the data for neutral articles up.

This might also be the reason for the significant drop in rights violations in coverage of children shown above (from 11% in 2016 to 1% in 2020). It is also important to note that there has been an absence on the part of key stakeholders focusing on advocating on children's rights, or even a rights based discourse which would also suggest less focus by the media on rights.

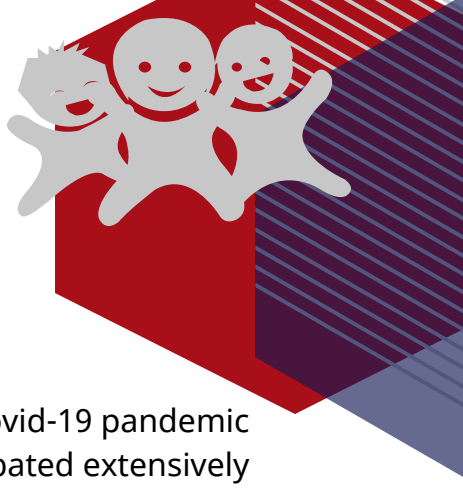


Quality of information

A qualitative element that MMA analyses relates to the kinds of information that is provided in stories about children. The aim is to assess whether the media goes beyond providing basic context to ensuring that the public understands exactly what is going on in a news story, what caused it, the consequences of whatever is being reported on, how it impacts the subject of the story or society and what help is available. All these are necessary when reporting on children as this is a skill that has to be done with creativity and with as much information as possible.



What can be deduced by looking at the data above is that 2016 was the year of better reporting in terms of explaining consequences, offering solutions, discussing relevant policies and providing self-help information. As has been explained in this report, between 2017 and 2019, coverage of children was dominated by crime involving children. With this topic leading, it may have been expected that the media would have offered more information on the causes and consequences which is higher than the 68% and 42% respectively recorded in 2017. Further, relevant policies that protect or impact the issue of children are very seldom mentioned, which means children are less likely to know about them.

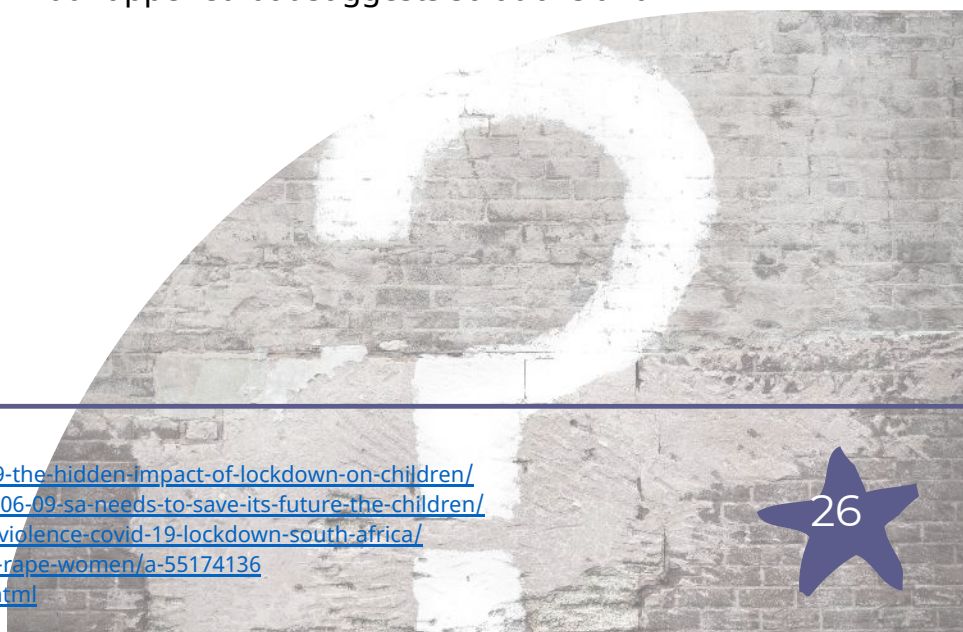


As has already been explained, the year 2020 saw coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic take centre stage. In this coverage, education was discussed and debated extensively in terms of schools closing and reopening. That said, articles that explained or merely included self help information such as how to prevent or survive Covid-19 and, which services to access if the impact of the pandemic took its toll on a child's mental health, should have had a record higher than the 0% shown above. This zero percentage means that the stories that did have self-help information constituted less than 1% (or even 0.5%).

In the 2020 period, some media reported that according to relevant authorities, South Africa had recorded a higher number of child abuse[43][44] and gender-based violence[45][46] cases which reportedly came as a result of the national lockdown. It may have been expected then, especially given the national government's ongoing efforts to communicate on gender based violence that relevant policies and self help information would have been provided. An example of an article with self help information on child abuse for parents and caregivers is one which not only outlined signs that parents and guardians can look out for if they suspect their child is being abused but also went further to give them information on steps on how to empower their children.

The data above suggests that media more often then not tend to merely report on children in a basic context by merely answering the 5Ws and 1H[47] of a news story (What, Who, Where, When, Why and How).

The omission of critical and useful information in coverage of children about rights, relevant policy, consequences and or self help means not only that the stories are less useful for children, but that they then don't assist in raising and deepening a culture of human rights. Media should be urged to ensure that their reporting on children goes above and beyond explaining what happened but suggests solutions and questions the lack of policy etc.



[43] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-05-29-the-hidden-impact-of-lockdown-on-children/
[44] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-06-09-sa-needs-to-save-its-future-the-children/
[45] https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/gender-violence-covid-19-lockdown-south-africa/
[46] https://www.dw.com/en/africa-pandemic-violence-rape-women/a-55174136
[47] http://newspaperarticleyear6.weebly.com/5ws--h.html

Conclusion and recommendations



The findings presented in this report show that there are still some key areas for improvement in the portrayal of children in the media. In coverage, children are still not visible, are not speaking and tend not to be portrayed in diverse positive and empowering roles. Further, children from provinces such as Limpopo, Eastern Cape, North West, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape and Free State are still neglected as these provinces continue to be underreported. When it comes to the promotion of the rights to participation, freedom of expression, privacy and dignity, the media is moving from outright violations to subtle violations where coverage neither promotes nor grossly violates any of these rights, something which is a violation still because if the media fail to promote the right to freedom of expression for instance, then they are violating that right.

It is noted that the media has come a long way in terms of reporting on children but the fact that coverage of children is still less than 15% is concerning. Additionally, the fact that adults largely speak in coverage of children suggests many media have not grasped the need to have children speak for themselves in coverage. While there might be many factors that could be preventing the media from achieving better reporting of children as has been presented in this report, lack of skill and resources should not be one of the excuses.

There are so many resources with tips on how the media can go about reporting on children.[48] MMA has consistently provided tips on better reporting and the children themselves have presented their demands and recommendations. The media cannot afford to neglect children in coverage or continue to report on them as though the children are second class citizens. The implications of these are huge and if not corrected, the media will be a contributing factor to South Africa continuing to have children who are broken, are abused without getting justice, are abusers themselves and are lawless and, cannot speak up for themselves or participate in any democratic processes.

[48] https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/mma_editorial_guideline.pdf

It is important to note that these recommendations are simply the views of MMA but are indicative of common themes that have emerged and are repeated each year by the children we work with. This resulted in children developing their own list of demands which are presented below.



• We demand that media do more stories about children

• We demand that the media and adults in general take children seriously and do not underestimate us.

• We demand that media should not treat us like we are invisible. Children should be able to
express themselves in articles about them

• We demand that media should represent children in many roles especially positives ones.
Therefore we want to see more survivors, heroes, active citizens, sports children and achievers.

• We don't deny bad things happen to children but there should be less stories where children are shown as powerless victims, criminals or children in poverty

• We want to see more positive stories about education, sports, health, culture, arts, and less stories about negative topics such as rape, abuse, crime and murder.

• We demand that newspapers should include solutions in children stories.

• We demand that media focus on children from all provinces especially in the rural areas

• We demand that media respect, promote and not violate our rights to dignity, privacy, freedom
of speech and our right to participation

• Only use pictures that do not violate children's rights to dignity and privacy

• We demand that journalists put more effort in getting more information before publishing a story about children.

• We encourage media to continue reporting on boys and girls equally – we are all human beings

• We demand that you get our opinions in a way that would not offend or harm us

• Stop stereotyping us on the basis of gender

• Media should not interview children when they are still emotional or traumatised, they need to be
given time to heal.

• Don't show children's identities when something bad has happened to them