



# STATE OF CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

An analysis of media's coverage of children in 2022

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

South African media are guided by a number of legal and ethical frameworks when reporting on children, examples include Section 28.2 of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution[1] and the Criminal Procedure Amendment Act[2]. Ethically, if the media are not bound by the Press Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media,[3] then they are bound by their own media's press codes as well as other acceptable standards of journalistic practices when reporting on children. Further, South Africa is a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC) [4] and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)[5] which promote children's rights to freedom of expression, dignity and privacy, among other rights.

Since 2003, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) has been monitoring the coverage of children in the media to check adherence to these ethical and legal frameworks on reporting on children. Further, the monitoring has been to determine trends in coverage with a particular focus on issues reported, whether children speak in this coverage as well as the quality of the coverage, amongst other aspects. Through analyses of the media's coverage of children, MMA has been able to identify successes and gaps and has used the findings to advocate for better reporting on children using platforms such as the Isu Elihle annual awards[6] - an MMA initiative that is aimed at encouraging alternative thinking around reporting on children.

In 2022, MMA monitored 13 South African print and online media for a period of five months to look into whether the media adhere to the legal and ethical frameworks as well as to determine whether there has been an improvement in media's coverage of children on aspects such as quantity and quality of the information in the coverage. Under quality of information, MMA looks at whether coverage mentions causes, explores solutions and whether policy and legislation are questioned in coverage. Findings have been analysed into this report.

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[1] <https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/SACConstitution-web-eng-02.pdf>

[2] [https://static.pmg.org.za/Act\\_No\\_16\\_of\\_2021\\_Criminal\\_Procedure\\_Amendment\\_Act\\_2021.pdf](https://static.pmg.org.za/Act_No_16_of_2021_Criminal_Procedure_Amendment_Act_2021.pdf)

[3] <https://presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODE>

[4] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc/celebrating-30-years-convention-rights-child/pledge-south-africa>

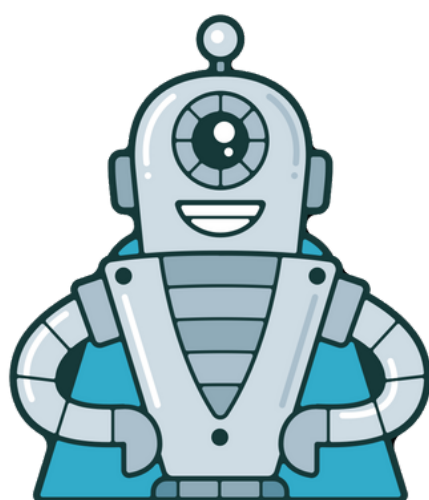
[5] <https://www.acerwc.africa/ratifications-table/>

[6] <https://isuelihle.org.za/>

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Findings presented in this report were gathered over a monitoring period of five months, starting from the 1st of May to the 30th of September, 2022. Dexter, which is MMA's online media monitoring tool was used to collect and scrape the articles monitored and analysed. A total of 13 South African print and online media were analysed.[7] Broadcast media were not monitored because of the current limitation of Dexter which only scrapes articles from websites. When selecting the articles, the following keywords; learner/pupil, child/children, minor, baby, toddler, infant, teenager were captured in the tool to scrape the data. All those articles that did not relate to children were removed from the analysis. A total of 13, 153 stories were gathered and of those, 851 were about children. This translates to 6% media coverage of children in 2022.

After the collection of the articles, an added quality check element was employed where a team of trained and experienced media monitors looked through the data and monitored using a set criteria that checks aspects 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, and the quality of the information etc.



**DEXTER**  
MEDIA MONITORING AFRICA INITIATIVE

[7] Business Day, Cape Argus, Cape Times, City Press, Daily Sun, Mail & Guardian, Saturday Star, Sowetan, Sunday Times, Sunday World, The Citizen, The Star, The Sunday Independent

# 3. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings from the monitoring results are presented, and comparisons are made to monitoring conducted in 2021. This is done to gauge whether there has been a shift or improvements in how children are reported in the media. The section begins with the number of stories, continues with the media performance, origin of the stories, most covered topics, children's voices, children's voices vs adults', what adults are saying, children's rights, how children are portrayed, boys versus girls in coverage, and ends with a section on quality of information.

## 3.1. Number of stories

The number of stories was monitored to determine the frequency of the stories that mentioned children in the media. Furthermore, the quantity of coverage was monitored and analysed to determine the urgency media put on the issues that are related to children.

According to Statistics South Africa mid-year population estimates of 2022,[8] children constitute about 36% of the population. However, the children's representation in the media is very low when compared to the population. Media need to make a deliberate effort to ensure that there is an increase in the number of children's stories in the media. This is in turn likely to result in these issues being put on the agendas of and being addressed by policy makers.

Figure 1 below shows that only 6% of the stories monitored mentioned/involved children. This means that in 2022, only 6% of all reported stories during the monitoring period reported on children. Furthermore, the 2022 results show a decrease in coverage of children in the news when compared to the year, 2021 where the coverage was at 10%.[9]The decrease in the percentage of stories reporting on children is disheartening because this means that the media continues to neglect placing issues that are affecting children on their agenda. When the media inadequately reports on children, government is not appropriately held accountable to ensure issues faced by children are addressed.

[8] <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022022.pdf>

[9] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Childrens-Report-2021.pdf>



## Amount of stories about children vs. other stories

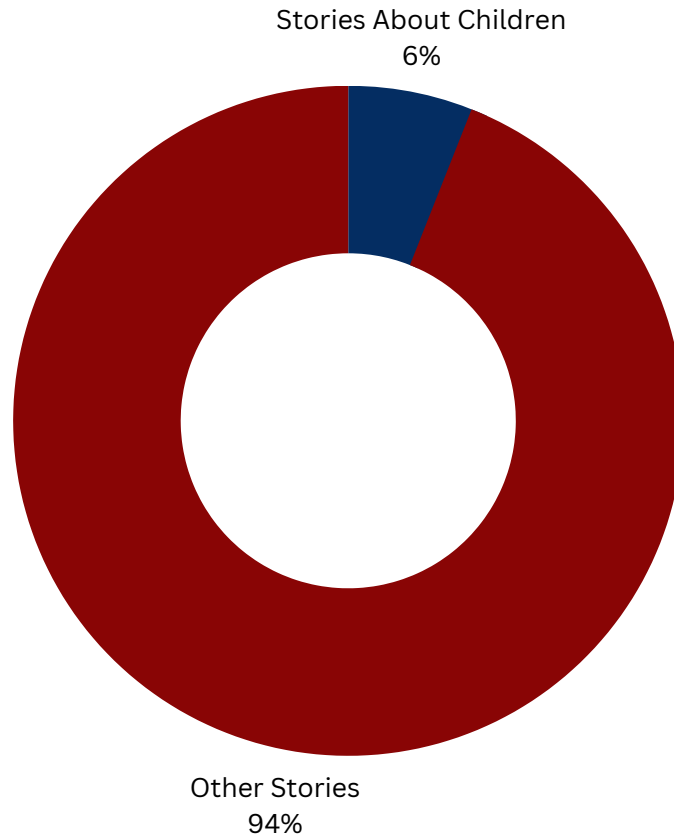
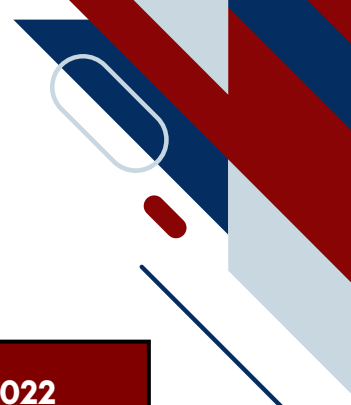


Figure 1: Amount of coverage on children

### 3.2. Media performance

Individual news outlets' attention to children and issues the children face can be gauged by the number of stories about them per medium. A comparison on the number of stories about children in each media with all stories that were not about children in that media was made to get the percentage of stories on children. Figure 2 below shows how the monitored media fared when reporting on children compared to other media. A comparison has been made with the 2021 findings to determine whether improvements have been made or not.



Media Names	2021	2022
The Citizen	12%	17%
Cape Times	18%	13%
The Star	15%	12%
Daily Sun	9%	11%
Sowetan	7%	8%
Cape Argus	12%	7%
Sunday Times	12%	7%
Sunday World	4%	7%
Mail & Guardian	13%	5%
The Sunday Independent	11%	5%
Business Day	2%	3%
City Press	12%	1%
Saturday Star	9%	1%

**Figure 2: Media performance on coverage of children**

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The Citizen must be commended for the increased coverage on children, moving from fourth place in 2021 at 12% to be the media with the most coverage on children in 2022 at 17%.

Another big performer is Daily Sun which moved from being among the media with the least amount of coverage on children in 2021 (9%) to the top 4 in 2022 (11%).

Furthermore, Sunday World, which is a weekly tabloid publication has seen an increase in the number of stories it reported on children. Similarly, Business Day has also seen an increase in their coverage of children. The increase in Business Day's coverage is commendable especially that the publication mostly reports on business-related stories. Similarly, Sunday World is commended for its increase in coverage of children especially that children hardly feature in entertainment news stories – stories that dominate Sunday World.

Nonetheless, some of these media have decreased in performance when compared to 2021. For example, Cape Times' coverage decreased from 18% to 13%. This is a huge decrease which can be attributed to a decrease in the number of stories that origin from Western Cape (see Figure 3). This affected the numbers of stories because majority of the stories that are published in Cape Times originate from Western Cape.

Similarly, the performance of media such as Mail & Guardian, Saturday Star and City Press have decreased drastically when compared to 2021. Mail & Guardian received 13% of coverage in 2021 and 5% in 2022. Saturday Star received 9% in 2021 and 1% coverage in 2022. City Press received the lowest coverage from 12% in 2021 to 1% in 2022.[10] This decrease shows that these media are not sufficiently prioritising issues affecting children in their publications. These media need to ensure that when reporting on the issues that are affecting the country, they do not neglect the issues that are related to or affect children.

### **3.3. Origin of the stories**

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The origins of the stories helped understand where the stories that involved or included children come from and which regions got the most coverage. This is important to determine the provinces that are given prominence and which ones are neglected.

[10] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Childrens-Report-2021.pdf>

## Breakdown of the origin of all stories vs. children's population

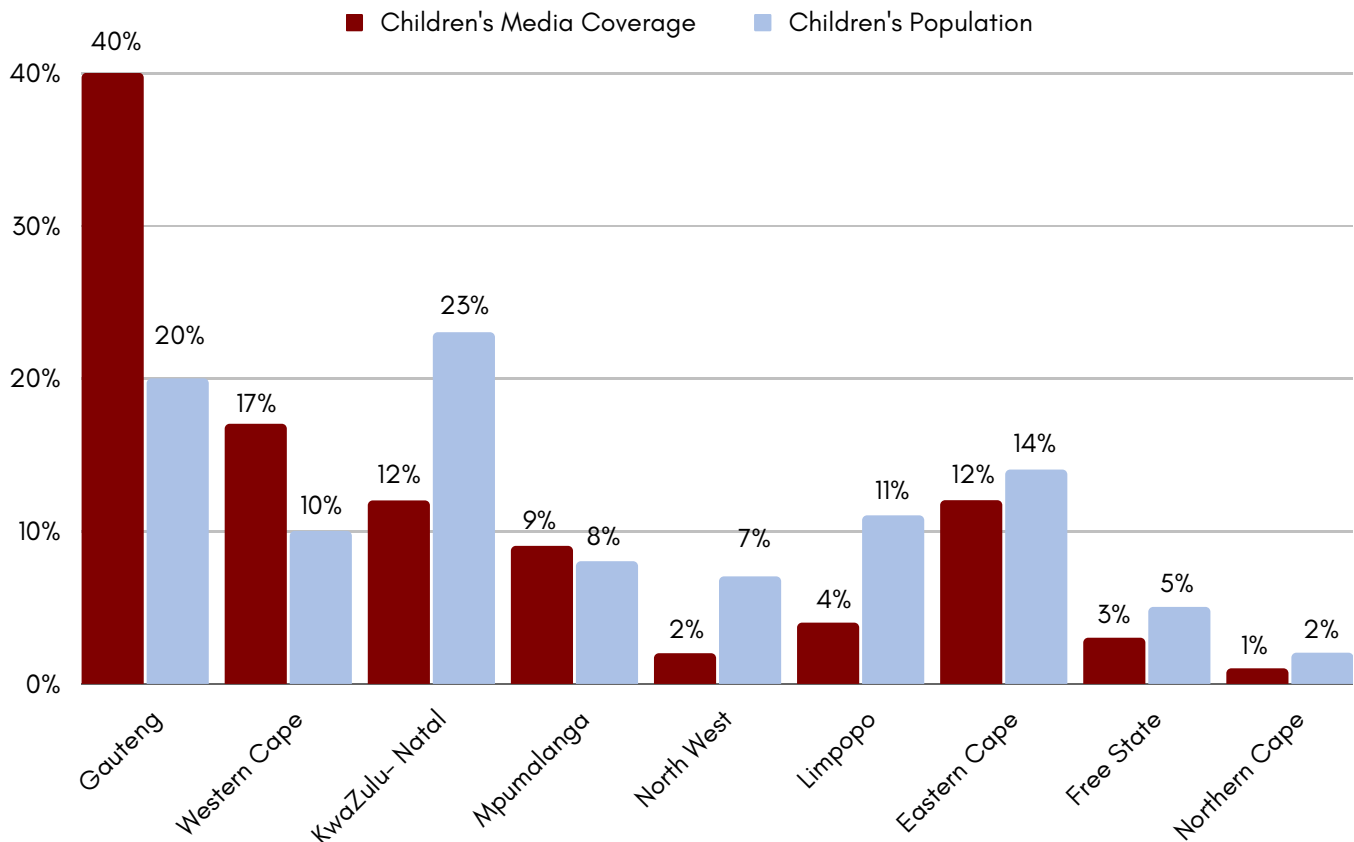


Figure 3: Origin of the stories on children

As seen in Figure 3, Gauteng and Western Cape continue to dominate media coverage at 40% and 17% respectively. In 2021, Gauteng and Western Cape received 39% and 34% respectively. It must be noted that despite Western Cape being the second reported on, it has in fact decreased in coverage by 50% and such a decrease can be attributed to the decrease in coverage of children related stories from Cape Argus and Cape Times which predominantly report stories that originate from Western Cape. (See section 3.2 for media performance).

The third highest coverage is Eastern Cape which received 12%. This is a significant increase when compared to 2021 where the province received 5% of coverage. This increase can be attributed to the coverage of the tragedy that happened at Enyobeni tavern in East London which led to 21 deaths[11] where some of the victims were under the age of 18 years.

Similarly, Kwa-Zulu Natal also received 12% coverage. However, the stories from Kwa-Zulu Natal have drastically decreased from 21% in 2021 to the 12% in 2022. The decrease in Kwa-Zulu Natal can be attributed to the shift in news reporting because of the devastating floods that affected most parts of the province which resulted in many people losing the lives and livelihoods.[12]

[11] <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/enyobeni-tavern-deaths-children-were-suffocated-toxicology-report/>

[12] <https://mg.co.za/top-six/2022-05-22-roads-flooded-buildings-washed-away-in-latest-durban-downpour/>



Meanwhile, Northern Cape continues to be the province that receives less coverage on children’s related issues. In 2021 and 2022, the province received 1% each year. This low representation of children in the media in the Northern Cape can be attributed to the province having the lowest population on children.[13]

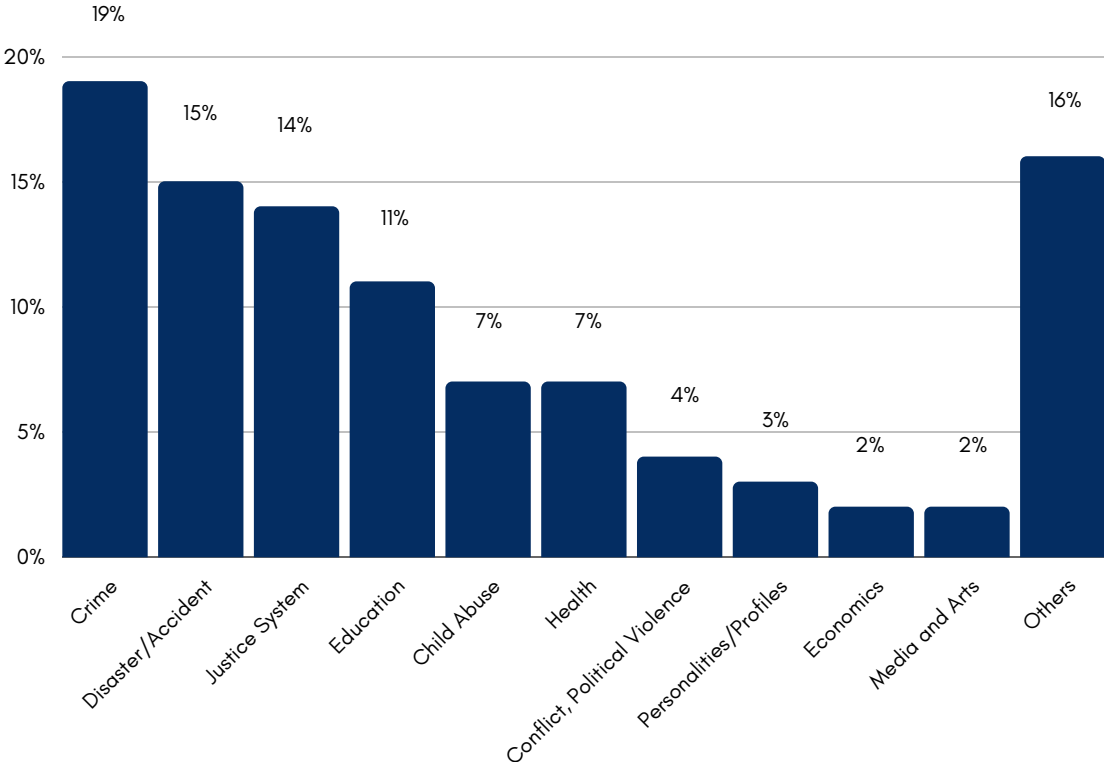
When compared to children’s populations in various provinces, the findings show that some provinces like Gauteng are overrepresented in media coverage. The children’s population in this province constitutes 20% of the country and yet the province received 40% coverage in the media. Similarly, Western Cape has 10% of the population being on children but received 17% coverage.

In contrast, children from KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and North West are underrepresented in the coverage. In these provinces, children’s population is at 23%, 11% and 7% respectively yet they received a coverage of 12%, 4% and 2% respectively.[14] [15]

### 3.4 Most reported topics

Analysing the topics covered presents the opportunity to identify issues that are given prominence by the media when reporting on stories that involve children. Figure 4 below highlights the top 10 topics covered by the media in South Africa during the monitoring period.

**Figure 4: Top 10 topics (which is 84% of all topics)**



[13] <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022022.pdf>  
 [14] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Childrens-Report-2021.pdf>  
 [15] <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022022.pdf>

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Topics such as crime, disaster, justice system, education and child abuse continue to dominate coverage. The top 10 topics constitute 84% of all the topics reported in the media in relation to children. However, the sequence in which they dominate has changed when compared to 2021 where education was leading as the most reported topic in the media at 16% followed by crime at 13%. In 2022, crime dominated the coverage at 19% followed by accidents/disaster at 15%. The increase in crime coverage could be attributed to the overall increase of crime in South Africa. According to the South African Police Services, crime statistics for the period between July and September, 2022 show that crime increased when compared to the same period in 2021.[16] Meanwhile, the increase in coverage of accidents/disaster can be attributed to the media coverage of a six-year-old boy who fell down a manhole in Dlamini, Soweto[17] – a story that dominated media coverage at the time.

Despite the continuous dominance of some topics mentioned above, economy as a topic made it to top 10 topics at 2% replacing politics which constituted 3% in 2021.[18] Economy making it to the top 10 can be attributed to the economic hardship caused by Covid-19 and its aftermath. Media must be commended for focusing on such stories because it shows that the media was more conscious of the current challenges and their impact on children.

Media continues to pay less attention to topics such as substance abuse (1%), poverty (0%), gender (1%) etc. This has been a norm which can be attributed to the fact that most media report their stories based on particular events. Media need to make a deliberate effort to ensure that these topics make it to the top 10 because they are very important to many South African children and all who reside in South Africa.

### **3.5. Children's voices**

Children must be given an opportunity to speak for themselves about their achievements, hopes, fears as well as add their voice to issues that affect them and the impact of these on their lives. Furthermore, they must be given an opportunity to speak because they have a right to express their views on matters that affect them. This must be done in accordance with the Constitution's Bill of Rights in Section 28.2 which states that "child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child".

[16] <https://www.saps.gov.za/services/downloads/July-to-September-2022-Presentation.pdf>

[17] <http://www.dailysun.co.za/dailysun/news/13-days-later-khaya-still-missing-20220627>

[18] <https://mediamonitoringafrika.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Childrens-Report-2021.pdf>

## Children accessed vs. those not accessed

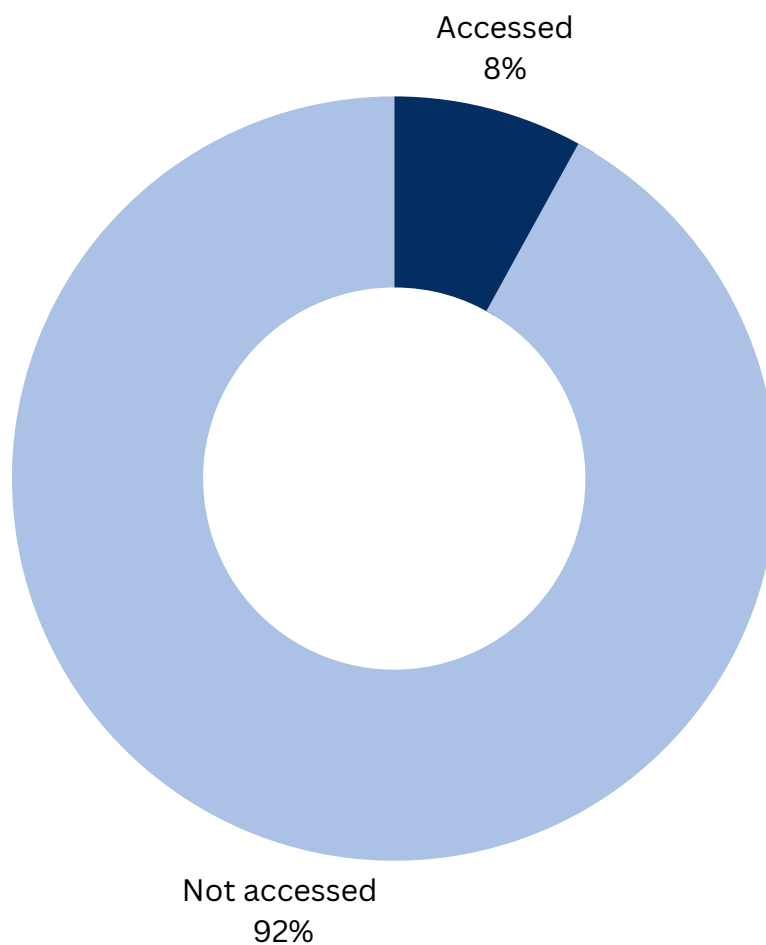




Figure 5: Children's voices in the coverage

Children's voices continue to be low in news coverage. In 2022, children's voices in the news was at 8% which is a slight difference to the 7% recorded in 2021. This is concerning because it means that in most of the articles about children, they are often just mentioned and not given an opportunity to express their views. Media must make sure that children are given opportunities to add their voice to coverage when it is in the children's best interests. A story titled, "Joburg author Stacey Fru, 13, shortlisted for international award" is one of the examples where media failed to give the child involved in the story a voice.[19] Accessing this child would not have endangered them or exposed them to any potential harm. There are many stories such as this where the media failed to give children a voice. If media had accessed children in stories such as this, the children's voices would have been higher than the current percentage.

[19] <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/news/joburg-author-stacey-fru-13-shortlisted-for-international-award-0a8a38d4-949a-47d5-b3e0-25eca32a508e>




The media may have not accessed children in most of the stories analysed during the monitoring period because it was not in the children's best interest to do so as the majority of stories reported on crime at 19%, disaster/accidents at 15% and child abuse at 7%. While this is arguably understandable, the media could have employed creative ways to get children's views without subjecting the children to potential harm. Here, MMA always urges the media to let children not directly affected by an incident to speak on the topic or those children directly affected to speak after they have undergone thorough counselling.

Accessing children as sources in media stories about the children is not only in their best interest to do so but also contributes to the diversification of sources in the news thereby ensuring that all age groups contribute to the discourse. In addition, it also gives society an understanding of how children think of various issues in the society. More importantly, having children speak about issues affecting them in media ensures that institutional responses to issues the children face are discussed and addressed with children's input.

The media therefore need to ensure that in all stories about children especially where there is no potential for harm, the children's voices are always included.

### **3.6. Children's voices versus adult's voices**



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## Children's voices vs. adults' voices

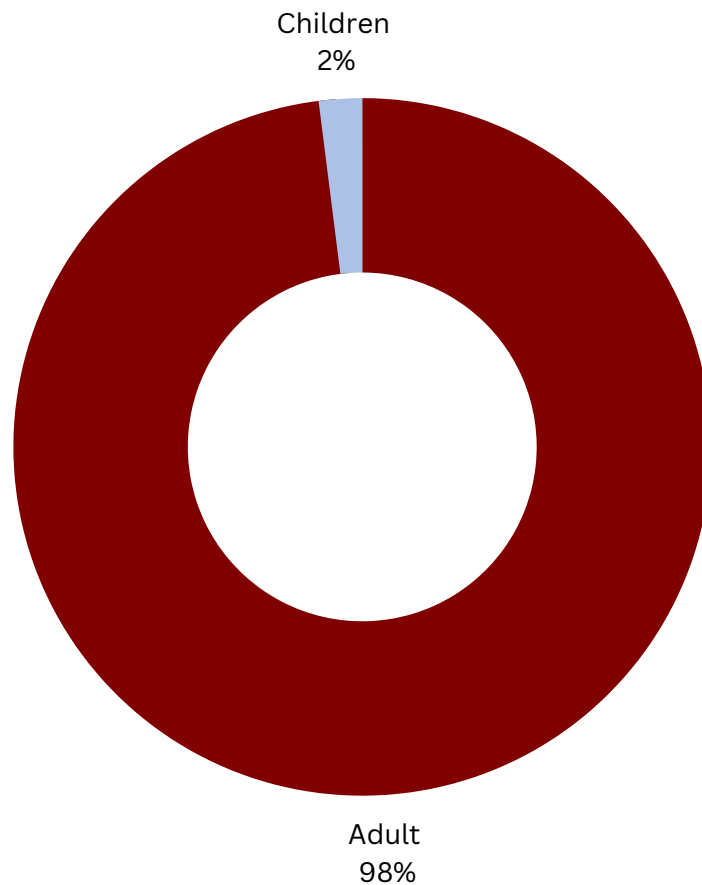


Figure 6: Children's voices versus adults' in coverage

### 3.7. Children's voices versus adult's voices

Findings show that adults have a louder voice but what are they exactly saying when they are speaking? All direct and indirect quotations by adults were collated and put into a word cloud. The bigger the word, the more it was repeated in the quotations. The figure below highlights the words mostly spoken by adults. The word cloud shows that children, police, departments (this includes government departments) and learners were used more often by adults compared to other words.

"Children" is the most dominant word because only coverage on children was analysed.

Furthermore, the high rates of crime against children like rape and other abuse contributed to "police" featuring prominently as well. In addition, the top 10 topics show that crime dominated as a topic in the 2022 media coverage of children. Similarly, the word, "learner" appearing amongst the most used words by adults could be attributed to education as a topic being amongst the most covered topics by the media. Meanwhile, the words that dominated in 2021 were "children" and "said."

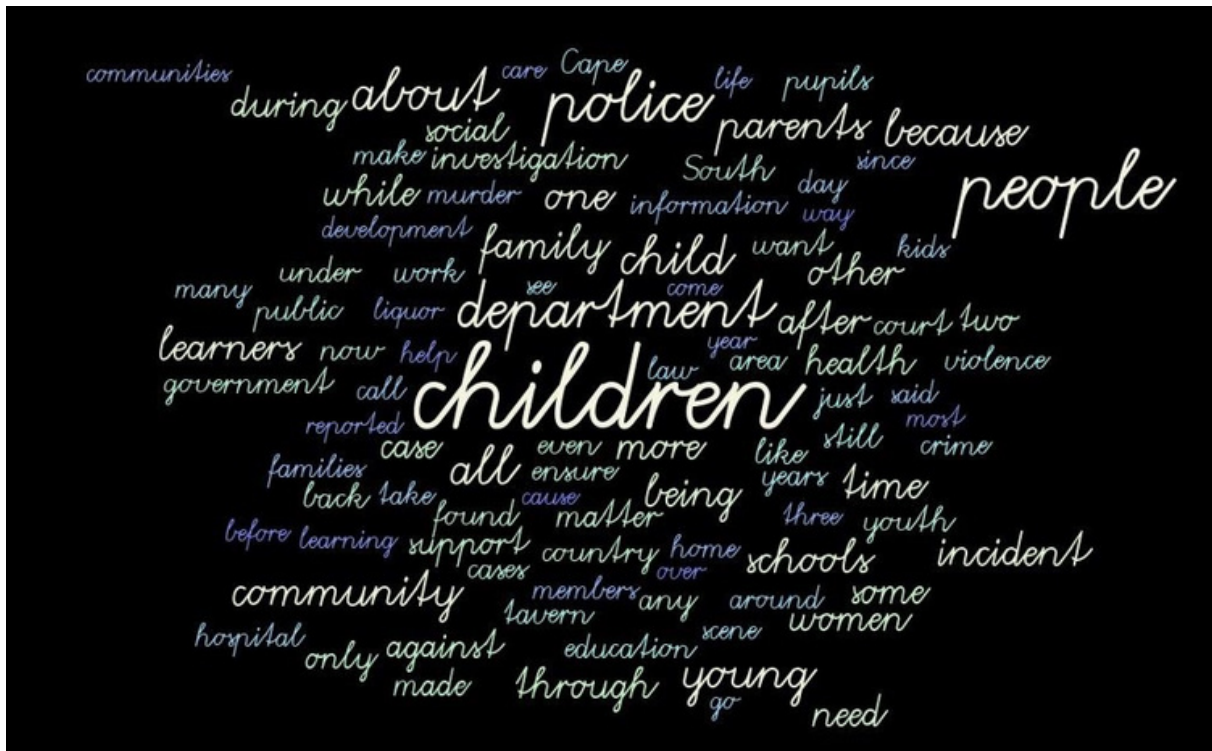


Figure 7: Word cloud of the most used words by adult in coverage

### 3.8. Children’s rights

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.

The 2022 findings show that 4% of the stories in 2022 violated the rights of the children which is an increase when compared to 2021 where media violation of children’s rights was at 2%. Media were deemed to have violated the children’s rights when they failed to withhold the identities of children when they were supposed to. This included naming the children or naming someone close to them which could make it easy for the children to be identified. Furthermore, the media were deemed to have violated children’s rights when they were supposed to give them a voice and they did not.

Meanwhile, 12% of the stories respected the rights of the children in the stories. The media were deemed to have respected children’s rights when they withheld identities of children to protect them from further potential harm, and when they interviewed children when it was in the children’s best interests.



Most of the stories that were monitored did not outrightly respect or violate children's rights. While this might be argued to be commendable, it is in fact a failure to protect and especially promote children's rights. Further, it could also mean that these stories did not have children as the main focus.

Protecting the identities of victims in media coverage when there is potential for harm is an essential ethical requirement. By protecting the privacy and dignity of those who have suffered harm, media professionals can help to promote the recovery and well-being of victims, for instance.

Furthermore, media accessing children in stories when in the children's best interests can help to promote children's rights, increase awareness and understanding of issues affecting children, help challenge negative stereotypes around children and, inspire and empower both children and adults to take action towards a better and more equitable world for all.

Promoting and protecting children's rights in the news can be achieved only if the media start to strictly adhere to all ethical and legal frameworks around reporting on children - frameworks that the media are bound by.

### Children's rights respected vs. rights violated

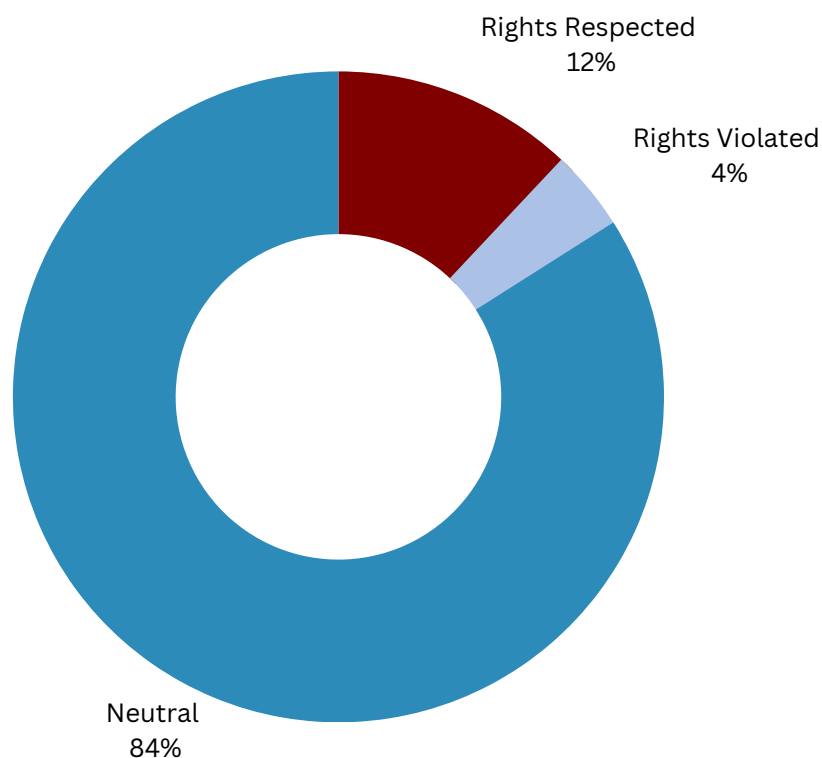
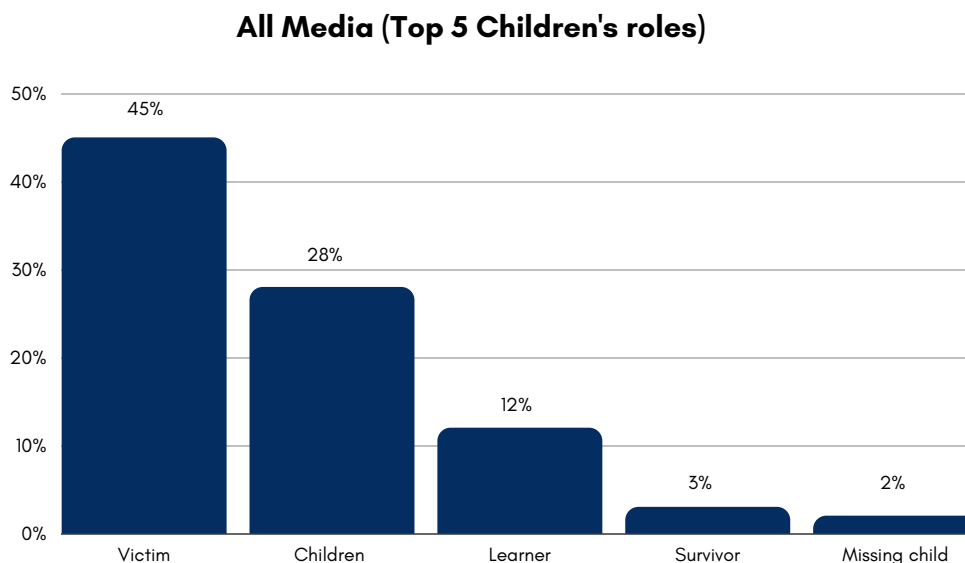


Figure 8: Children's rights in coverage

### 3.9. How are children portrayed?

How the media report on children and how the children are portrayed in this coverage has an enormous influence on how society views children. More often than not, the media tend to see children as victims especially in a society where crime and abuse is rife. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the roles that media allocate to children in order to determine whether the media continues to portray children in limiting roles or not.



**Figure 9: Top 5 children's roles in coverage**

The results in Figure 9 show that children occupy limited roles in the media with the top 5 roles constituting 90% of all coded roles that children are allocated in the media. These roles have remained relatively the same when compared to 2021 save for the one exception which is missing child at 2%, which replaced suspect as a role.

However, when it comes to the most dominating role, victim replaced children. In 2021, children and victim constituted 52% and 20% respectively. Such great dominance of victim could be attributed to the coverage of the tragedy that happened at Enyobeni tavern in East London which led to 21 deaths where some of the victims were under the age of 18. [20] [21] This can also be attributed to the topic, crime, dominating on the list of most covered topics.

The portrayal and roles assigned to children in media can have a significant negative impact on children's self-esteem, self-image, and aspirations. It is therefore important for the media to portray children in empowering roles and this can be done by diversifying the topics reported so that more positive topics such as sports also feature on the list of most reported topics.

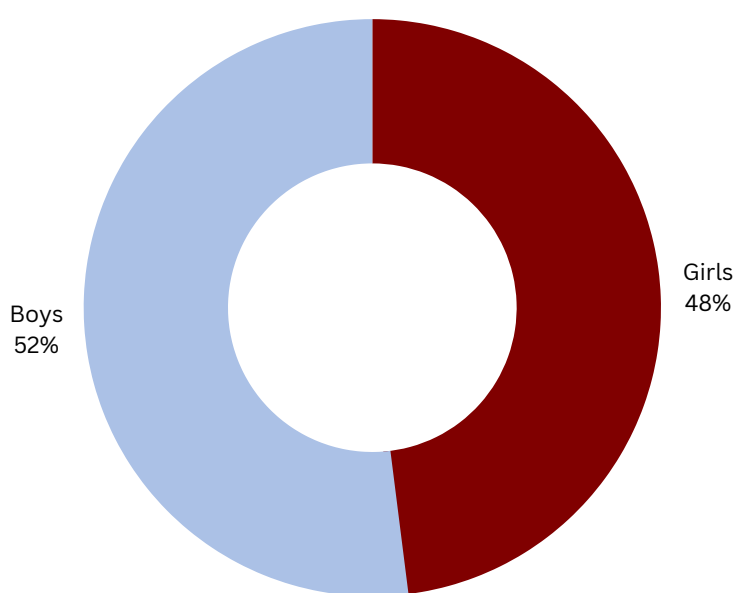
[20] <https://www.citizen.co.za/news/enyobeni-tavern-deaths-children-were-suffocated-toxicology-report/>

[21] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Childrens-Report-2021.pdf>

### 3.10. Boys versus girls in coverage

Gender inequality is a problem that most countries continue to grapple with and media can be a vital tool in tackling and raising awareness around this challenge. Hence, it is very important to look at how boys and girls are represented in the media. It is imperative that the media provides a platform that allows equitable participation across all genders. This is important for promoting diversity, challenging gender stereotypes, empowering individuals, and promoting social justice. What is clear from Figure 10 below is that the gap in representation is very small when it comes to the coverage given to boys and girls.

**Figure 10: Girls versus boys coverage**




**Figure 10: Gender representation in coverage**

As shown in Figure 10, boys received more coverage at 52% than girls at 48%. This is similar to 2021. Media are commended for an almost equal coverage of boys and girls. This shows that the media is deliberately making an effort to ensure that the previously marginalised people in our society are present in the media. In addition, achieving equitable gender representation in the media is a major step towards promoting gender equality, breaking down barriers, challenging stereotypes and, promoting a more inclusive and diverse society.

The gender representation shown above in Figure 10 is a big difference to the representation of adult males and females where there is limited representation of females in media coverage of issues and events of national importance. For instance, in media coverage of the 2021 local government elections, females were represented as sources at only 19%.[22] This difference in gender representation between children and adults in coverage is substantial and noteworthy.

[22] <https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/wordpress22/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/LGE21-Elections-Report-.pdf>

### 3.11. Quality of information in the stories



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All coverage provided basic context about the events in the articles as can be seen from Figure 11 below at 100%. Basic context in this case means responding to the five Ws and an H of reporting. These are 'what,' 'who,' 'where,' 'when,' 'why,' and 'how'. All the stories monitored provided basic information and 91% mentioned the causes of the issues under discussion in coverage. Despite this percentage of stories mentioning causes being high, stories exploring solutions were only at 3%.

Meanwhile, stories that discussed relevant policies constituted 3%. Media need to make sure when reporting on various stories, they discuss relevant policies and legislation. This is important for holding those in power to account. For example, if the story reports on schools still using pit latrines, the media needs to discuss the policy on the eradication of pit latrines in schools.

Stories with self-help information are always extremely low in media coverage. Considering that crime and child abuse feature in the top 10 most reported topics, the media should make sure coverage of such issues is accompanied by self-help information. Victims and would-be victims including parents and caregivers need information such as what to do when you are victim or witness, where to go, the number to call for help and, tips on how to avoid being a victim to such incidents in the future, etc.

Meanwhile, in 2021, all the stories provided the basic context at 100% and 92% of the stories mentioned causes, 56% explained consequences, 4% offered solutions, 1% discussed policies/legislation and none of the stories mentioned self-help.

The media need to be cognisant of the fact that their coverage can have a significant impact on society, shaping public opinion, setting the agenda, influencing behaviour, and enabling an environment where issues facing children are addressed. Therefore, the media must always ensure that all stories on children, where applicable mention causes, consequences, solutions, discuss relevant policies and offer self-help information.

## Quality of information

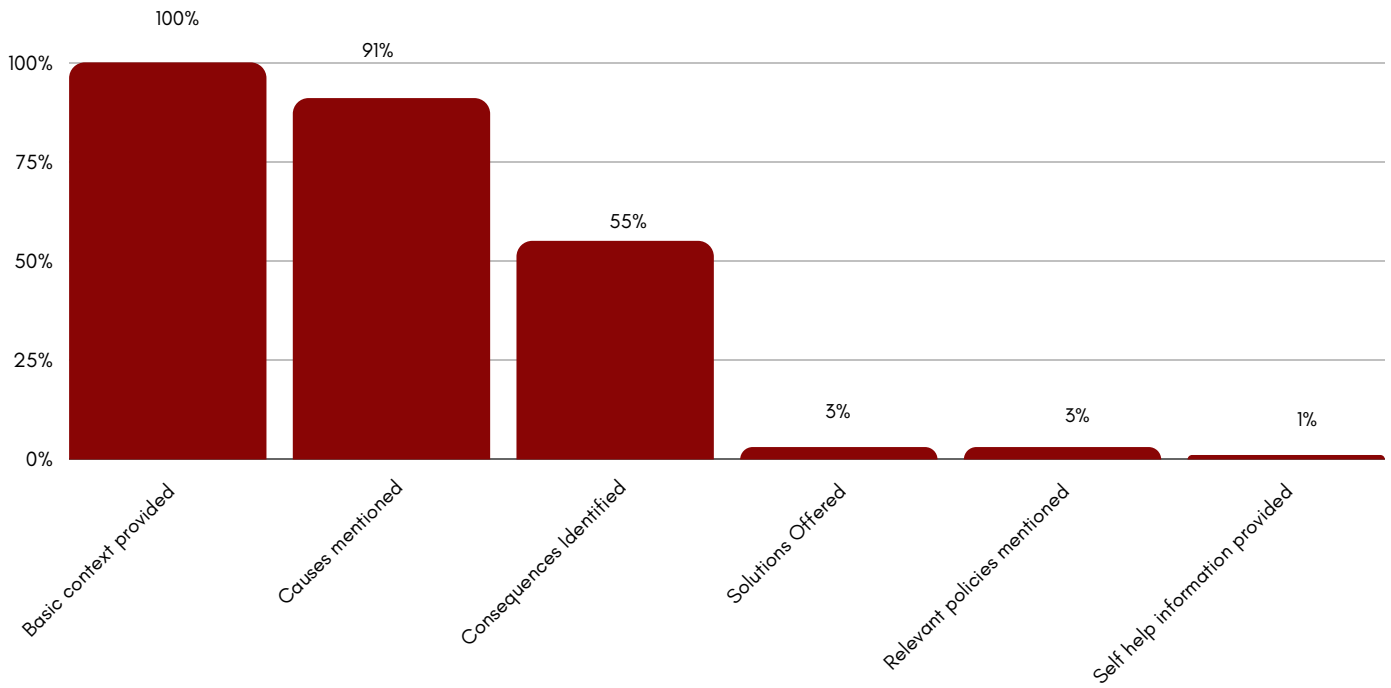


Figure 11: Quality of information in coverage

## 4. Conclusion

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Overall, the report has shown that the media in South Africa still needs to improve in how they represent and portray children in the media. From the report, it has been shown that;

- The coverage on children continues to be low and the number of stories published relating to children has decreased from 10% in 2021 to 6% in 2022. This means that the issues that are affecting children are receiving less coverage in the media. If children's issues are not adequately reported, people may remain unaware of the challenges and problems faced by children. This can lead to a lack of public support for policies and programs that benefit children. More importantly, it can lead to a lack of policies and their implementation by those in power.
- Media continues to report more on stories from major provinces such as Gauteng (40%) and Western Cape (17%) while neglecting provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. This can result in a lack of awareness and redress of issues and challenges faced by children in other parts of the country.
- Media continues to violate the children's rights by failing to protect their identities when they are supposed to be protecting them etc. Even though the violations are fewer at 4%, the impact of such violations, which could lead to further victimisation, and the stigma associated with being a victim of a crime or abuse can cause psychological distress and damage to a child.
- The monitoring findings indicate that for the most part, children are spoken of and not spoken to in the media. In all the stories about children, only 8% were accessed as sources. This is problematic because without the input of children as sources, media reporting may present a limited understanding of issues that affect them. This can result in incomplete reporting and analysis that does not accurately reflect the experiences of children.
- The dominant roles the media allocates to children remain predominantly the same. The lack of diverse roles in the media can lead to further perpetual stereotyping of children. This can contribute to negative perceptions and biases towards children thus perpetuating systemic inequalities.



# 5. Recommendations

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Based on this conclusion, MMA recommends the following to the media to help with the improvement of their coverage on children.

- The presence of children in the media is vital, especially since they represent a substantial population proportion in South Africa (currently 36%). MMA urges the media to report more on children and their issues.
- Media coverage should reflect the diverse issues that affect children, not only in terms of topics covered but also in terms of geographical coverage. Additionally, children can add new perspectives to common stories on topics ranging from economy to politics to sports.
- Where possible, the media needs to look beyond just mentioning children to accessing them as much as possible. It is important that the media are constantly reminded of the importance of including children's voices and are trained on how to reach them ethically, especially when accessing children can be cumbersome and daunting.
- When reporting about children's rights, the media should aim to have zero tolerance for infringement. By providing continuous training as well as effective systems of media accountability, media who violate ethical standards in their reporting can be held accountable.
- The media should strive to portray children in roles that empower rather than disempower them since they are capable of much more than they are given credit for. It would be better to portray children as survivors, rather than as victims, since the latter has a positive connotation.



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