

What makes a father, according to South Africans?

Just over a third (36%) of children in South Africa live with their biological father, a figure that has remained fairly consistent over several years. However, the State of South Africa's Fathers 2021 report, a first-of-its-kind survey on fatherhood, paints a much more nuanced picture than simply a nation of absent fathers. Produced by the HSRC, Sonke Gender Justice, the Men Care campaign and Stellenbosch University, this report discusses the survey alongside data from the General Household Survey, the Social Attitudes Survey and the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey.
By **Andrea Teagle**

A first-of-its-kind survey on fathers and fatherhood in South Africa found a broad consensus on the importance of fathers' involvement in children's lives, with 9 in 10 (89%) participants agreeing that all children need fathers to grow up well.

The survey involved 1 003 respondents across the country who were either biological fathers or identified as social fathers. The findings were released in the [State of South Africa's Fathers 2021 \(SOSAF\) report](#), the latest in a series that aims to produce academic evidence and insights to inform law and social reform, and to provide credible arguments to influence national narratives around fathers and fatherhood in South Africa.

Over half (55%) of the participants said that it was the act of care that made a man a father, compared with 32% who said it was making a woman pregnant that made you a father. However, some apparently contradictory views of fatherhood and caregiving emerged from the report, as acceptance of men in nurturing roles came up against more traditional, ingrained views of men as mainly material providers.

For example, while 77% of participants indicated that men were as good caregivers as women, in a separate question, more than half of participants (55%) agreed that women were naturally better parents than men, with only 23% disagreeing with this statement. The apparent inconsistency might be explained by participants viewing financial assistance as part of caregiving in their answers to the first question.

At the launch of the report, Prof Kopano Ratele of Stellenbosch University spoke about the findings of another country-wide survey on parents' attitudes towards gender equality (see p134–135, chapter 6 of the report).

The survey found that while most participants – men and women – said that they agreed with gender equality, when asked about specific roles in the household, a different picture emerged. For instance, 56% of men and 66% of women agreed that girls should do more of the housework than boys.

Encouragingly, in the SOSAF survey, only 27% of participants agreed that it was inappropriate for men to be kindergarten teachers, suggesting that most men believe that care work is not solely reserved for women. The report highlights that a policy approach that increases the number of men in paid caregiver roles is important for normalising men's caregiving practices. Additionally, Ratele and his co-authors write in chapter 6 there is a need for 'targeted efforts to making gender equality more practical ... for example by encouraging egalitarian views and practices between partners, gender-neutral toys and play, and by advocating for fathers and sons to do more housework'.

Father involvement

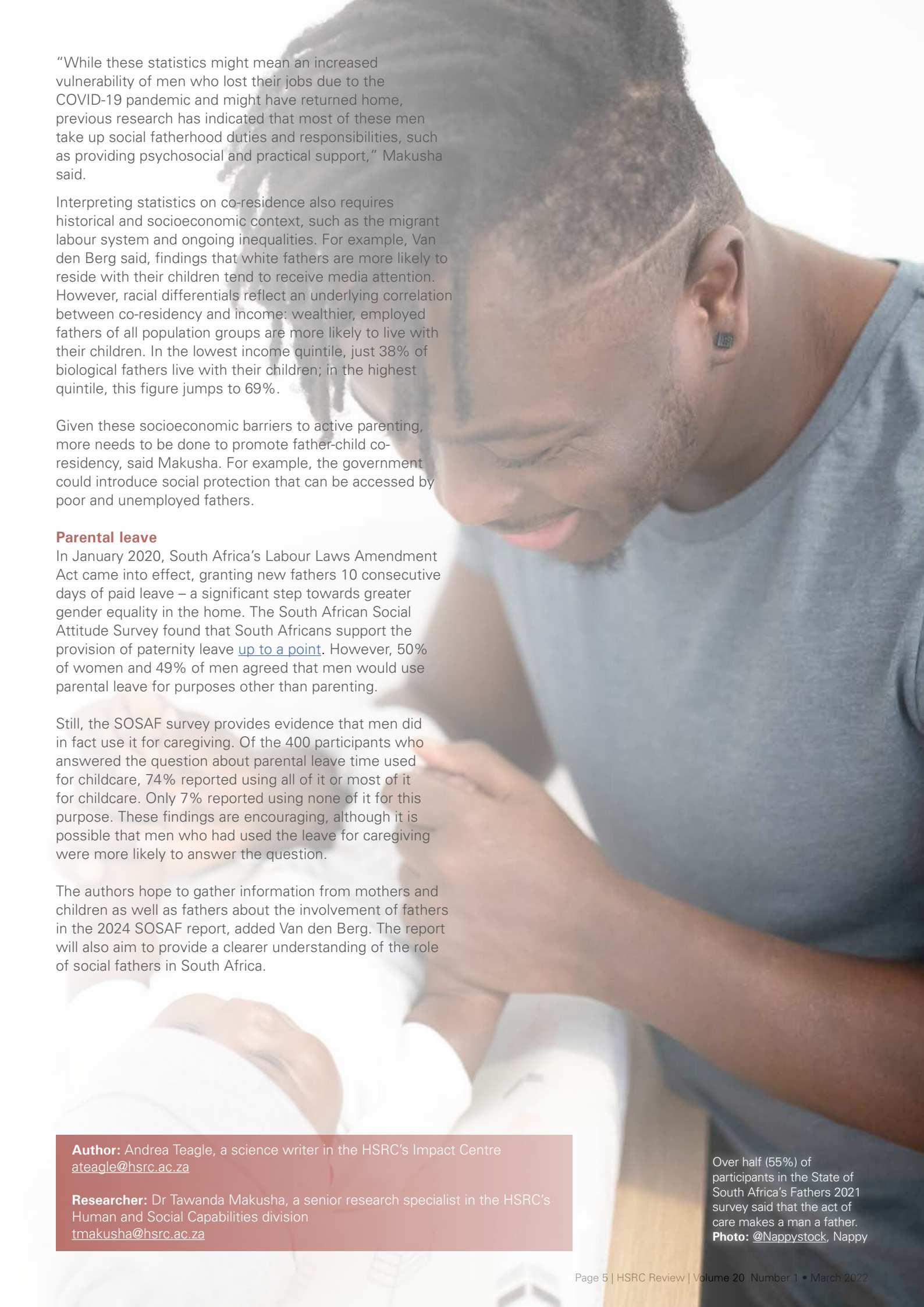
Father involvement in South Africa is often gauged by statistics on how many children live with their father, and how many men live with their children. The latest household survey found that 36% of men lived with their children. However, statistics on co-residence are a limited proxy for father involvement, according to the HSRC's Dr Tawanda Makusha.

Statistics on co-residence do not capture fathers who live elsewhere but who are involved practically, emotionally and financially in their children's lives. According to the report, 45% reported interacting with their youngest child at least twice a week (with 10% reporting once a day or more), and a further 17% reported interacting once a month. Co-residence statistics also do not account for the fact that some fathers who reside with their children are violent or completely uninvolved in their lives.

"The fact that there is a father in the house doesn't mean much more than the fact that there is a father in the house," pointed out Wessel van den Berg of Sonke Gender Justice, speaking at the report launch. "What means much more to children's outcomes is the involvement of the father."

One of the report's major findings was the number of men who were not biological parents but who lived with children and identified as social fathers. General household survey statistics that capture instances where 'the child is living with the mother only' do not ask about other adults in the household, Van den Berg said.

The number of men living with children increased from 48% in 2019 to 61% in 2020.



“While these statistics might mean an increased vulnerability of men who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and might have returned home, previous research has indicated that most of these men take up social fatherhood duties and responsibilities, such as providing psychosocial and practical support,” Makusha said.

Interpreting statistics on co-residence also requires historical and socioeconomic context, such as the migrant labour system and ongoing inequalities. For example, Van den Berg said, findings that white fathers are more likely to reside with their children tend to receive media attention. However, racial differentials reflect an underlying correlation between co-residency and income: wealthier, employed fathers of all population groups are more likely to live with their children. In the lowest income quintile, just 38% of biological fathers live with their children; in the highest quintile, this figure jumps to 69%.

Given these socioeconomic barriers to active parenting, more needs to be done to promote father-child co-residency, said Makusha. For example, the government could introduce social protection that can be accessed by poor and unemployed fathers.

Parental leave

In January 2020, South Africa’s Labour Laws Amendment Act came into effect, granting new fathers 10 consecutive days of paid leave – a significant step towards greater gender equality in the home. The South African Social Attitude Survey found that South Africans support the provision of paternity leave [up to a point](#). However, 50% of women and 49% of men agreed that men would use parental leave for purposes other than parenting.

Still, the SOSAF survey provides evidence that men did in fact use it for caregiving. Of the 400 participants who answered the question about parental leave time used for childcare, 74% reported using all of it or most of it for childcare. Only 7% reported using none of it for this purpose. These findings are encouraging, although it is possible that men who had used the leave for caregiving were more likely to answer the question.

The authors hope to gather information from mothers and children as well as fathers about the involvement of fathers in the 2024 SOSAF report, added Van den Berg. The report will also aim to provide a clearer understanding of the role of social fathers in South Africa.

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Over half (55%) of participants in the State of South Africa’s Fathers 2021 survey said that the act of care makes a man a father.
Photo: [@Nappystock](#), Nappy



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