

DECENT  
STANDARD  
OF LIVING

DSL

**Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute**

AUGUST 2021

**9 August 2021**

## **Introduction**

In June 2021 BDRC Africa conducted a telephone survey to obtain attitudinal information about the things that people need in order to have a decent standard of living in present-day South Africa. Respondents were randomly selected from a South African consumer database list provided by List SA using a quota-controlled sample designed to be representative of the South African population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, income and urban/rural dwelling. In total, 921 quantitative interviews were successfully completed.

A comparison of the survey sample with Statistics South Africa's Mid-Year Population Estimates (MYPE) for 2021 for three key demographic characteristics is shown in Table 1. Although the distributions are similar in the survey sample and MYPEs, there are some notable discrepancies and therefore it was decided to reweight the survey data, controlling to demographic data for mid 2021. The reweighting process was undertaken using the technique of iterative proportional fitting (IPF) (also referred to as 'raking'). The Stata .ado file *ipfraking* was used and the reweighting controlled to the three demographic characteristics and categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Population shares for three demographic characteristics, survey and Mid-Year Population Estimates

<b>Demographic characteristics</b>		<b>Percentage survey</b>	<b>Percentage MYPE 2021</b>
Race	Black	64.9	78.5
	Coloured	10.3	9.1
	Indian	5.4	2.3
	White	19.3	9.4
Gender	Male	51.0	48.0
	Female	49.0	52.0
Age	18-29	29.8	30.0
	30-49	45.7	44.2
	50+	24.5	25.8

Note: MYPE for 18-29 year olds calculated as 40% of the 15-19 age group + 20-24 year olds + 25-29 year olds

## Analysis of all items

Respondents were asked whether each of 50 items is essential for everyone to have in order to enjoy an acceptable standard of living in South Africa today. These items covered material possessions, activities, neighbourhood facilities and relationships with friends and family. The three possible answers were 'essential', 'desirable' or 'neither'.

Table 2 shows the percentage responding that an item is essential, first without using weights (every observation has a weight of 1) and then with the new weights generated as describe above. Alongside this is the percentage responding essential when these questions were last asked in the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2006. The table is sorted by the weighted percentage responding essential in 2021.

The usual way of determining whether an item should be regarded as a socially perceived necessity (SPN) is to look at the majority view, that is any item defined as essential by 50% or more of the population. On this basis, 34 items are SPNs in 2021, compared to 36 in 2006. A garden (49%), some new clothes (46%), and a special meal at Christmas or equivalent festival (34%) dropped out of the list of SPNs in 2021, while a lock-up garage for vehicles moved in (but only just at 51%). Certain items saw a big change in the percentage of people responding essential between 2006 and 2021, including somewhere for children to play safely outside the house, a cell phone and burglar bars in the house, which were regarded as essential by an additional 10% or more. There were also items which fewer people regarded as essential in 2021, including a place of worship in the local area, someone to lend you money in an emergency and a radio, which all had a difference of at least 10 percentage points between 2006 and 2021.

The reweighting does not make too much difference overall or to the list of 34 SPNs. A radio and a lock-up garage for vehicles (both just under 50%) would not have been in the list of SPNs had the data not been reweighted, and car (at 51%) would have been in the list.

Table 2: Percentage of respondents defining an item as essential, 2021 and 2006

Item	% responding essential in 2021 (unweighted)	% responding essential in 2021 (weighted)	% responding essential in 2006
Mains electricity in the house	93.05	92.42	92
Someone to look after you if you are very ill	90.66	91.54	91
A house that is strong enough to stand up to the weather, e.g. rain, winds, etc.	92.07	90.95	90
Street lighting	90.99	90.55	85
A fridge	90.01	90.05	86
Clothing sufficient to keep you warm and dry	90.01	89.05	89
For parents or other carers to be able to buy complete school uniform for children without hardship	83.39	84.06	79
A flush toilet in the house	85.34	83.62	78
Paid employment for people of working age	84.15	83.52	79
Somewhere for children to play safely outside of the house	82.30	83.06	72
A cell phone	79.80	82.96	63
People who are sick are able to afford all medicines prescribed by their doctor	83.50	82.96	77
Having police on the streets in the local area	82.30	81.69	80
Separate bedrooms for adults and children	80.89	81.55	82
A neighbourhood without rubbish/ refuse/ garbage in the streets	81.54	80.35	75
Having an adult from the household at home at all times when children under ten from the household are at home	78.94	79.91	81
A fence or wall around the property	80.02	79.78	74
Someone to transport you in a vehicle if you needed to travel in an emergency	80.24	79.38	74
Burglar bars in the house	79.15	79.21	62
Ability to pay or contribute to funerals/ funeral insurance/ burial society	74.70	77.86	82
Being able to visit friends and family in hospital and other institutions	74.16	75.52	73
Tarred roads close to the house	75.35	74.78	80
Regular savings for emergencies	72.64	73.98	71

A place of worship (church/ mosque / synagogue) in the local area	72.42	71.48	87
A large supermarket in the local area	69.92	71.34	75
A bath or shower in the house	73.94	70.45	62
Someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	67.75	69.24	76
A neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air	63.95	63.68	69
Television / TV	59.50	63.58	69
Someone to lend you money in an emergency	51.36	55.29	66
A sofa / lounge suite	51.57	54.63	54
Meat or fish or vegetarian equivalent every day	53.31	54.49	62
A radio	49.51	52.71	74
A lock-up garage for vehicles	49.84	51.07	43
A car	50.81	48.75	49
A garden	44.30	48.65	51
Washing machine	47.88	45.83	44
Some new (not second-hand or handed-down) clothes	44.52	45.61	55
A burglar alarm system for the house	43.54	44.10	38
A smart phone	38.87	41.81	/
An armed response service for the house	36.48	37.65	28
Special meal at Christmas or equivalent festival	32.90	34.28	56
A computer in the home	32.79	33.69	26
A small amount of money to spend on yourself, not on your family, each week	28.66	30.84	42
For parents or other carers to be able to afford toys for children to play with	28.88	30.80	39
Having enough money to give presents on special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, funerals	27.14	29.70	41
A family take-away or bring-home meal once a month	27.47	29.14	34
Satellite television/DSTV	23.56	26.06	19
A holiday away from home for one week a year, not visiting relatives	22.69	24.52	37
A DVD player	12.70	13.91	27

Two thirds threshold (27 SPNs)

50% threshold (34 SPNs)

Note: For the 2021 survey, landline was dropped and smart phone was added.

For the DSL analysis, based on the responses to the 2006 survey, a more stringent threshold was used to determine the SPNs: any item regarded as essential by two thirds or more of respondents. This resulted in 27 SPNs,<sup>1</sup> which is the same number as in 2021. However, the list of SPNs is not quite the same: cell phone, burglar bars and bath or shower in the house joined the list of SPNs in 2021, while a neighbourhood without smoke or smog, television and radio dropped out.

Overall, the list of SPNs, whether using a 50% or two thirds threshold, has remained quite stable over time.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha is a technique that can be used to test the reliability of the set of items identified as essential (Cronbach, 1951). It was used in the analysis of SASAS 2006 (Wright, 2008) and also in similar studies internationally. The scale reliability coefficient (alpha) measures the set of items defined as essential with all other hypothetical sets of items. The square root of the coefficient (alpha) is the estimated correlation of the set of items with a set of errorless true scores (Cronbach, 1951). For the set of 34 items defined as essential (based on a 50% threshold), the scale reliability coefficient (alpha) is 0.8572 and the square root of the coefficient (alpha) is 0.9259. In SASAS 2006, the scores were 0.9201 and 0.9592 respectively (Wright, 2008). Although not comprehensive, the 34 items can be considered a reliable measure of an acceptable standard of living as according to Nunnally (1981), reliability coefficients of 0.7 or higher are sufficient. If the higher two thirds threshold is used, the coefficient alpha is still above 0.7 at 0.8432 (square root 0.9183).

---

<sup>1</sup> This was reduced to 21 items for the DSL analysis because certain items were excluded as possession of the item could not be measured for all households.

### Analysis by sub-group

It is important to explore the extent to which different groups in the population have different views on which items are essential. If particular sub-groups respond in very different ways and an item is only defined as essential by certain groups in the population, then it could cast doubt on the set of SPNs.

#### *All 50 items*

First, correlations between the responses of different sub-groups for all 50 items are presented in the following tables.<sup>2</sup> The majority of correlations between sub-groups are higher than 0.9, for example the responses of males and females have a correlation of 0.9742 and the responses of those with children in the household and those without have a correlation of 0.9581 (no tables). With the exception of those defining themselves as wealthy compared to all other self-definitions of wealth status (Table 6), the correlations are all above 0.85.

Table 3: Correlation coefficients for all items, location

	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural
Urban	1.0000		
Peri-urban	0.9365	1.0000	
Rural	0.9245	0.9322	1.0000

Table 4: Correlation coefficients for all items, age group

	18-29	30-49	50+
18-29	1.0000		
30-49	0.9671	1.0000	
50+	0.9355	0.9580	1.0000

Table 5: Correlation coefficients for all items, population group

	Black African	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White
Black African	1.0000			
Coloured	0.8901	1.0000		
Indian/Asian	0.8509	0.9316	1.0000	
White	0.8817	0.9409	0.9300	1.0000

<sup>2</sup> All correlations reported in this section are Spearman's rank and are significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 6: Correlation coefficients for all items, self-defined wealth status

	Wealthy	Comfortable	Just getting along	Poor
Wealthy	1.0000			
Comfortable	0.7509	1.0000		
Just getting along	0.7330	0.9448	1.0000	
Poor	0.6053	0.8824	0.9095	1.0000

Table 7: Correlation coefficients for all items, household income

	0_4999	5000_9999	10000_19999	20000_39999	40000_plus
0_4999	1.0000				
5000_9999	0.9555	1.0000			
10000_19999	0.9106	0.9449	1.0000		
20000_39999	0.8735	0.9157	0.9297	1.0000	
40000_plus	0.8893	0.9517	0.9311	0.9156	1.0000

### ***The SPNs***

Table 8 summarises the responses of different sub-groups, detailing the number of items defined as essential (based on the 50% threshold) by a particular sub-group, how many of these items are SPNs (as defined by the whole population using the 50% threshold), and which of the SPNs are not defined as essential by the sub-group in question. Some sub-groups additionally defined other items as essential and these are also detailed in the table.

In general, the different sub-groups defined a very similar number of items (between 33 and 35) as essential and these are mostly the SPNs. The SPNs most often not defined as essential are someone to lend you money in an emergency, a lock-up garage for vehicles and a radio. Very few items are additionally defined as essential, most commonly a car, a garden and a washing machine. The peri-urban group defined 38 items as essential: the 34 SPNs and also a car, a garden, a burglar alarm and a smart phone. At the other end of the spectrum, the group which defined themselves as wealthy regarded only 22 items as essential and these are all SPNs. The Indian/Asian population group also defined a smaller number of items as essential: 29 in total, all of which are SPNs. The White population group also regarded only 29 of the SPNs as essential, but additionally defined a car and a washing machine as essential.



Table 8: Summary of sub-group responses (50% threshold)

Sub-group	Number of items considered essential by majority of sub-group	Number of SPNs as defined by total population (out of total of 34)	SPNs not considered essential by majority of sub-group	Number of items in addition to SPNs defined by total population	Additional items considered essential by majority of sub-group
Urban	34	32	someone to lend you money in an emergency; radio	2	car; garden
Peri-urban	38	34	/	4	car; garden, burglar alarm; smart phone
Rural	34	33	lock-up garage for vehicles	1	garden
Male	33	32	meat or fish every day; lock-up garage for vehicles	1	car
Female	34	34	/	0	/
18-29 year olds	33	33	radio	0	/
30-49 year olds	35	34	/	1	garden
50+ year olds	35	32	someone to lend you money in an emergency; lock-up garage for vehicles	3	car; garden; washing machine
Black African	35	34	/	1	garden
Coloured	34	33	radio	1	washing machine
Indian/Asian	29	29	television; someone to lend you money in an emergency; meat or fish every day; radio; lock-up garage for vehicles	0	/
White	31	29	television; someone to lend you money in an emergency; sofa/lounge suite; radio; lock-up garage for vehicles	2	car; washing machine
Children in the hh	35	34	/	1	garden

No children in the hh	33	32	someone to lend you money in an emergency; lock-up garage for vehicles	1	car
Wealthy	22	22	street lighting; fridge; cell phone; ability to pay or contribute to funerals; tarred roads close to the house; place of worship in the local area; large supermarket in the local area; television; sofa/lounge suite; meat or fish every day; radio; lock-up garage for vehicles	0	/
Comfortable	36	33	radio	3	car; washing machine, burglar alarm
Just getting along	35	34	/	1	garden
Poor	32	31	sofa/lounge suite; meat or fish every day; lock-up garage for vehicles	1	garden
Hh income 0_4999	34	33	lock-up garage for vehicles	1	garden
Hh income 5000_9999	35	34	/	1	some new clothes
Hh income 10000_19999	35	33	radio	2	car; washing machine
Hh income 20000_39999	33	31	someone to lend you money in an emergency; sofa/lounge suite; radio	2	car; washing machine
Hh income 40000_plus	33	30	place of worship in the local area; someone to lend you money in an emergency; meat or fish every day; radio	3	car; washing machine; some new clothes

Table 9 presents the same analysis but for items regarded as essential by two thirds of respondents. The pattern is very similar with the self-defined wealthy again defining far fewer items as essential (15 in total, 14 of which are SPNs), and the Indian/Asian group also defining a smaller number of items as essential (21 in total, 20 of which are SPNs). With the two thirds threshold, the self-defined poor regarded 22 items as essential, all of which are SPNs. This is a lower proportion of the 27 SPNs than the proportion of the 34 SPNs regarded as essential by the self-defined poor.

Table 9: Summary of sub-group responses (two thirds threshold)

<b>Sub-group</b>	<b>Number of items considered essential by majority of sub-group</b>	<b>Number of SPNs as defined by total population (out of total of 27)</b>	<b>SPNs not considered essential by majority of sub-group</b>	<b>Number of items in addition to SPNs defined by total population</b>	<b>Additional items considered essential by majority of sub-group</b>
Urban	26	26	someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	0	/
Peri-urban	28	27	/	1	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air
Rural	26	26	bath or shower in the house	0	/
Male	25	25	someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed; place of worship in the local area	0	/
Female	27	27	/	0	/
18-29 year olds	27	27	/	0	/
30-49 year olds	27	27	/	0	/
50+ year olds	25	24	place of worship in the local area; large supermarket in the local area; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	1	television
Black African	27	26	bath or shower in the house	1	television
Coloured	27	27	/	0	/
Indian/Asian	21	20	cell phone; separate bedrooms for adults and	1	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air

			children; ability to pay or contribute to funerals; being able to visit friends and family in hospital; regular savings for emergencies; large supermarket in the local area; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed		
White	24	23	ability to pay or contribute to funerals; regular savings for emergencies; large supermarket in the local area; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	1	car
Children in the hh	27	27	/	0	/
No children in the hh	25	25	large supermarket in the local area; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	0	/
Wealthy	15	14	street lighting; fridge; ability to buy complete school uniform without hardship; cell phone; separate bedrooms for adults and children; fence or wall around the property; someone to transport you in a vehicle if you needed to travel in an emergency; burglar bars in the house; ability to pay or contribute	1	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air

			to funerals; tarred roads close to the house; place of worship in the local area; large supermarket in the local area; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed		
Comfortable	28	27	/	1	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air
Just getting along	28	27	/	1	television
Poor	22	22	ability to pay or contribute to funerals; tarred roads close to the house; regular savings for emergencies; bath or shower in the house; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	0	/
Hh income 0_4999	25	24	regular savings for emergencies; large supermarket in the local area; someone to talk to if you are feeling upset or depressed	1	television
Hh income 5000_9999	29	27	/	2	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air; television
Hh income 10000_19999	28	27	/	1	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air
Hh income 20000_39999	28	26	large supermarket in the local area	2	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air; meat or fish every day
Hh income 40000_plus	29	26	place of worship in the local area	3	neighbourhood without smoke or smog in the air;

					lock-up garage for vehicles; washing machine
--	--	--	--	--	---

### Child-focused items

There are five items which relate specifically to children:

- For parents or other carers to be able to buy complete school uniform for children without hardship
- Somewhere for children to play safely outside of the house
- Separate bedrooms for adults and children
- Having an adult from the household at home at all times when children under ten from the household are at home
- For parents or other carers to be able to afford toys for children to play with

Only four of the five items are defined as SPNs (with both the 50% and two thirds thresholds), ability to afford toys for children being the one child-focused item not regarded as essential. A reasonably high percentage of respondents regarded the four items as essential, ranging from 80% for having an adult from the household at home to 84% for being able to buy school uniform without hardship.

When analysing by sub-group, the patterns are similar to those described above. The most obvious differences are within population group and within self-defined wealth status. The highlighted cells in Tables 10 and 11 show where there is a large difference between the percentage of the sub-group responding essential compared to the total population and the other population groups or self-defined wealth status groups. Note, however, that the large differences are not specific to the child-focused items but can also be seen for other items.

Table 10: Percentage of sub-group responding essential for child-focused items, population group

Child-focused item	Percentage responding essential			
	Black African	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White
For parents or other carers to be able to buy complete school uniform for children without hardship	85.13	83.29	72.03	79.64
Somewhere for children to play safely outside of the house	84.63	79.38	71.99	77.00
Separate bedrooms for adults and children	82.43	75.92	61.43	86.01
Having an adult from the household at home at all times when children under ten from the household are at home	80.22	82.50	78.04	75.50
For parents or other carers to be able to afford toys for children to play with	33.85	19.52	24.54	18.17

Table 11: Percentage of sub-group responding essential for child-focused items, self-defined wealth status

Child-focused item	Percentage responding essential			
	Wealthy	Comfortable	Just getting along	Poor
For parents or other carers to be able to buy complete school uniform for children without hardship	51.04	86.47	83.25	82.40
Somewhere for children to play safely outside of the house	86.58	83.18	85.10	74.00
Separate bedrooms for adults and children	51.68	78.06	86.01	71.81
Having an adult from the household at home at all times when children under ten from the household are at home	82.68	85.56	77.45	76.58
For parents or other carers to be able to afford toys for children to play with	17.32	29.60	32.17	28.18

As the current survey did not ask questions on possession, it is not possible to carry out the detailed analysis undertaken for the DSL. Given the high degree of correspondence between the 2006 and 2021 SPNs, for the time-being, the DSL could continue to be updated using a special subset of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). It is further recommended that a second survey is carried out asking about possession of the 34 SPNs and including a household income question that is more in line with those included in Statistics South Africa's surveys, which would enable the DSL analysis to be carried out.

## References

Cronbach, L. J. (1951) 'Coefficient Alpha and the Internal Structure of Tests', *Psychometrika*, 16 (3): 297-334.

Nunnally, J. C. (1981) *Psychometric Theory*, New York: Tate McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd.

Wright, G. (2008a) *Findings from the Indicators of Poverty and Social Exclusion Project: A Profile of Poverty Using the Socially Perceived Necessities Approach*, Key Report 7, Pretoria: Department of Social Development, Republic of South Africa.