

Correcting the erroneous statistic that “600 000 children with disabilities are out of school”

Stephen Taylor

DBE

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Introduction

A DBE report of 2015 mistakenly asserted that nearly 600 000 children with disabilities were not attending school. This statistic has frequently been referenced in the media and other reports, creating a major communication problem within the sector. This report explains how the mistake was made, and then presents better estimates, including a reanalysis of the underlying data that the DBE report had referred to, namely the 2010 General Household Survey.

What caused the mistaken statistic?

The table below is taken from the DBE (2015) Report on the Implementation of Education White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education. The table (incorrectly) indicates that an estimated 597 953 children with disabilities were out of school. The mistake arises by inappropriately combining two different data sources which use different definitions of disability. Based on DBE Education Management Information System (EMIS) data, which uses one way of defining disabilities, Column 4 indicates that 231 521 learners with disabilities are enrolled in school. Column 5 then uses a different data source - STATS SA's General Household Survey (GHS) - with a different (broader) definition of disability to estimate that 829 474 children in the country had a disability. The authors of the report then illegitimately subtracted the 231 521 learners (EMIS data) from the 829 474 children (GHS, broad definition) to arrive at 597 953. This number has often been rounded up to 600 000 and cited in various reports and media coverage.

But in the 2010 GHS data itself, 88% of those children with a disability *were* attending school. It is therefore clear that the difference between the 829 474 children in GHS and the 231 521 learners in EMIS is mainly due to differences in the recording/definition of disability rather than due to non-attendance of school. It is simply not correct to combine two different data systems using different definitions and ways of recording a disability, in this way.

Table 1: **Erroneous** table presented in a 2015 DBE Report

Table 18: Estimated number of children with disabilities to be out of school

Provinces	Total Number of Children 5 - 18	Total number of learners with disability enrolled in ordinary schools	Total number of learners with disability enrolled in SNE schools	Total number of learners with disabilities enrolled in school (Ord. and SNE)	5.8% of the Total Population of Children*	Estimated number of children with disabilities out of school
Eastern Cape	2 008 286	28 288	9117	32296	116481	84185
Free State	739 034	21 330	5801	28055	42864	14809
Gauteng	2 796 030	4 988	41184	68765	162170	93405
KwaZulu-Natal	3 140 568	9 229	16264	44264	182153	137889
Limpopo	1 655 548	2 608	8524	10899	96022	85123
Mpumalanga	1 207 351	2 433	3549	15464	70026	54562
North West	974 478	2 326	1646	4382	56520	52138
Northern Cape	321 557	2 209	5437	7320	18650	11330
Western Cape	1 458 417	7 291	20076	20076	84588	58017
Total	14 301 270	80 702	111598	231521	829474	597953

Source: DBE calculations made from statistics in the GHS and Annual School and Annual Special School Surveys of 2012

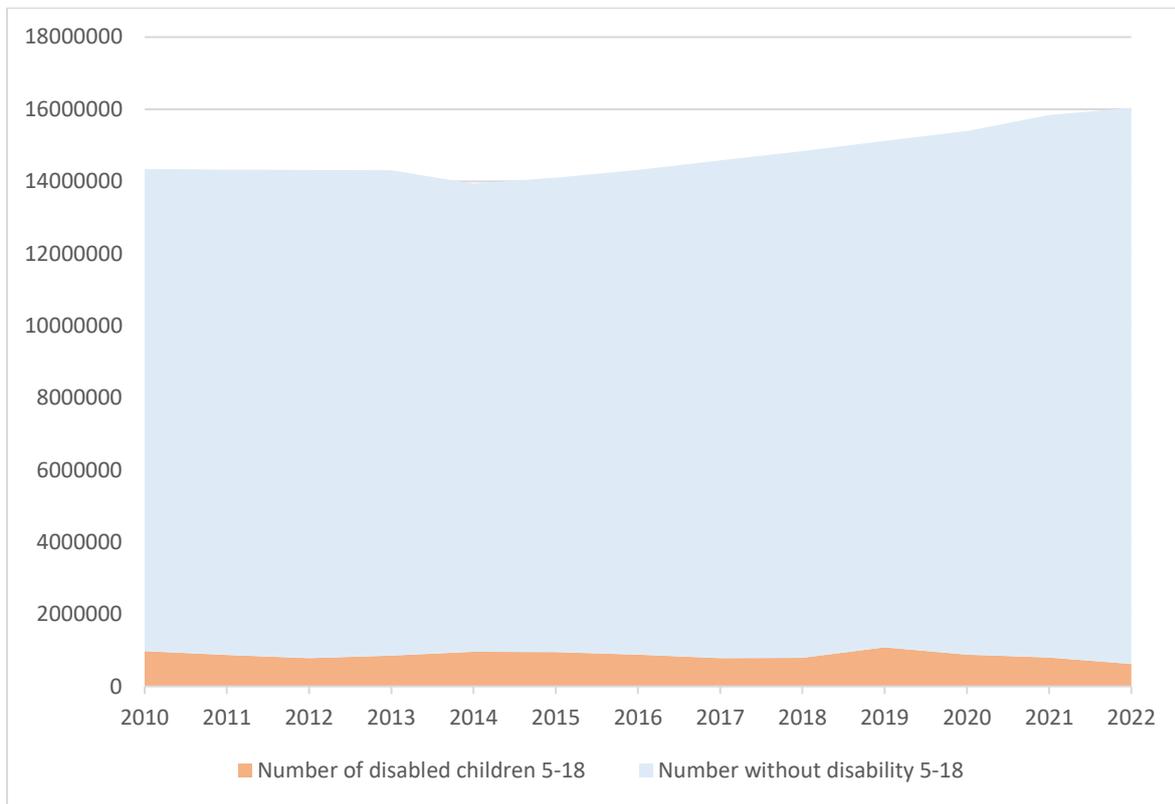
Correct estimates of how many children with disabilities are out of school

An important caveat to note about all the statistics coming from the General Household Survey is that because it is a sample survey, all statistics represent *estimates* of the population statistics. When it comes to sub-groups of the population, such as children with disabilities, these estimates become less precise because the numbers in the sample are quite small. This means that estimates can jump around a bit from one year to the next, and numbers should be roughly interpreted. For example, if we estimate that 31058 7-15-year-olds with disabilities were out of school in 2021 and 28614 were out of school in 2022, we should not conclude that a major downward trend occurred. Rather, we should say that about 30 000 children with disabilities were outside of school.

The mistaken figure of 600 000 children with disabilities are not attending school was based on an erroneous analysis of the 2010 General Household Survey (GHS). A reanalysis of GHS data shows that in 2010 the total estimated number of children between the ages of 5 to 18 with a disability (whether in- or out-of- school) was about 980 000. As the graph below shows, this estimate tended to vary across the years between about 600 000 and 1 000 000. This gives a sense of the imprecision in any one years' estimate. These numbers imply that between 4% and 7% of children were

reported to have a disability. These are quite high percentages due to the way the GHS defines a disability quite broadly as either difficulty seeing, difficulty hearing, difficulty walking or climbing steps, difficulty remembering and concentrating, difficulty with self-care, difficulty communicating or use of various assistive devices.

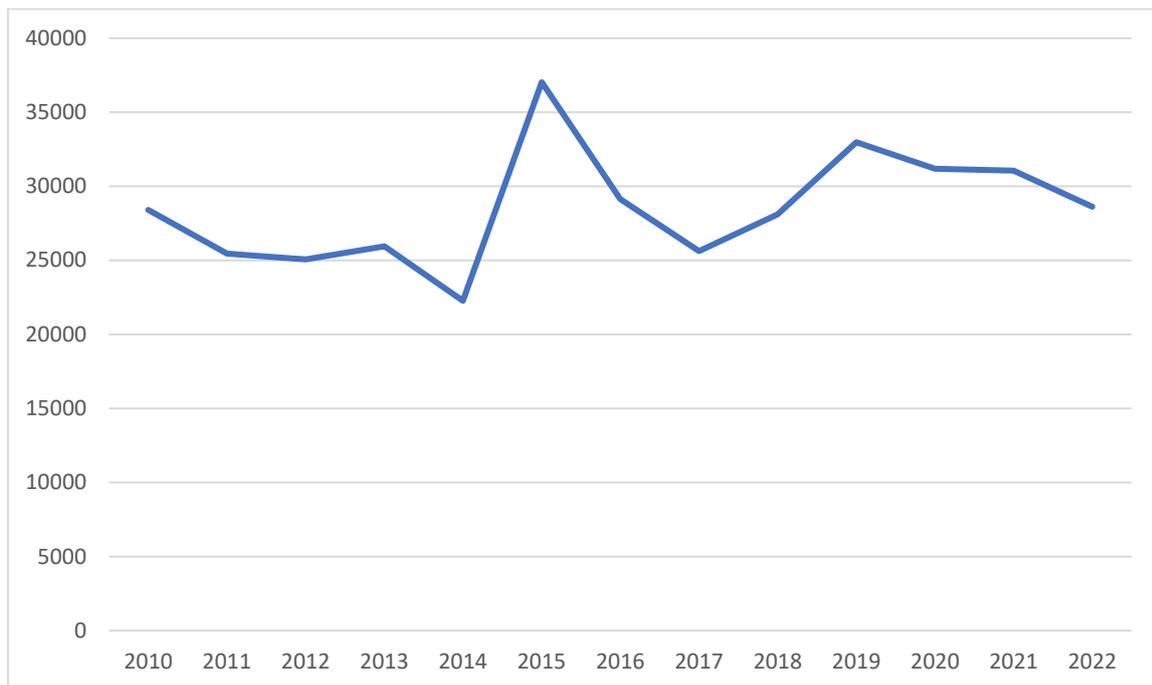
Figure 1: Estimated numbers of 5-18-year-old children in the population with and without a disability



Source: STATS SA General Household Surveys 2010-2022

Figure 2 shows that the number of out-of-school children with a disability within the compulsory school-going age of 7 to 15 has been around 30 000 over the years. This number is of course orders of magnitude smaller than the oft-quoted figure of 600 000.

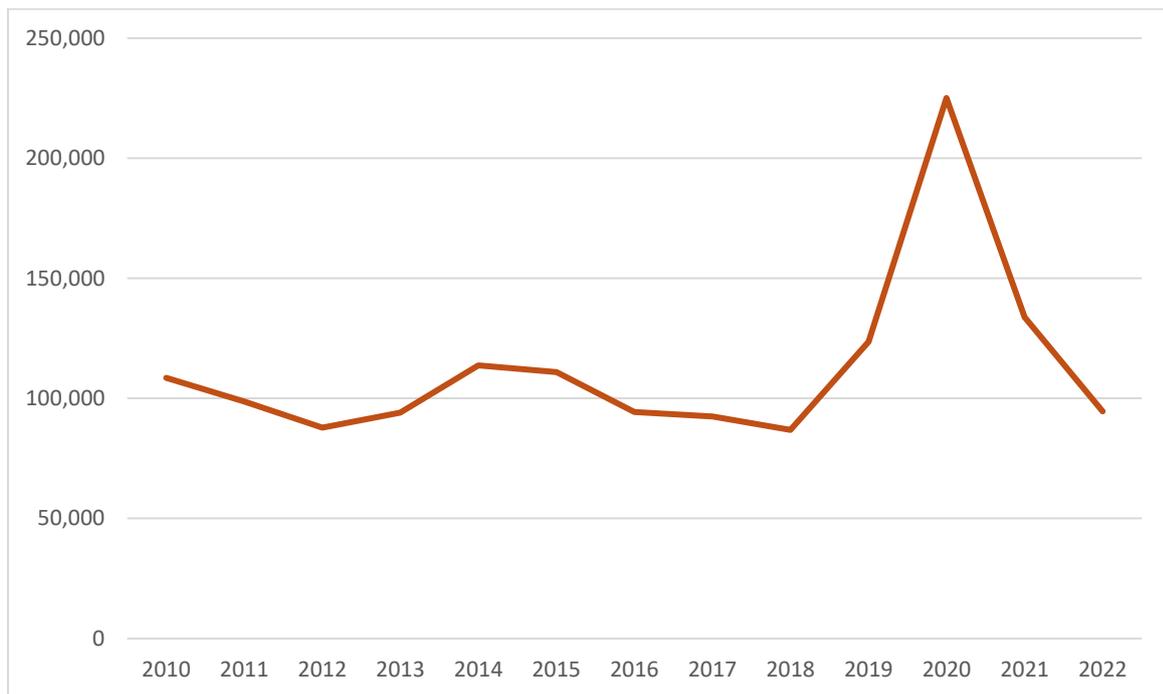
Figure 2: Estimated number of children out of school with disabilities ages 7-15



Source: STATS SA General Household Surveys 2010-2022

If we broaden the age range to 5-18-year-olds, then the estimated number of children with disabilities who are out of school has been around 100 000 ever since 2010. The big exception was 2020 when the pandemic led to a large increase in the number of young children (mainly 5 and 6-year-olds) who stayed at home. But even this estimate of about 100 000 is very different from the erroneous figure of 600 000.

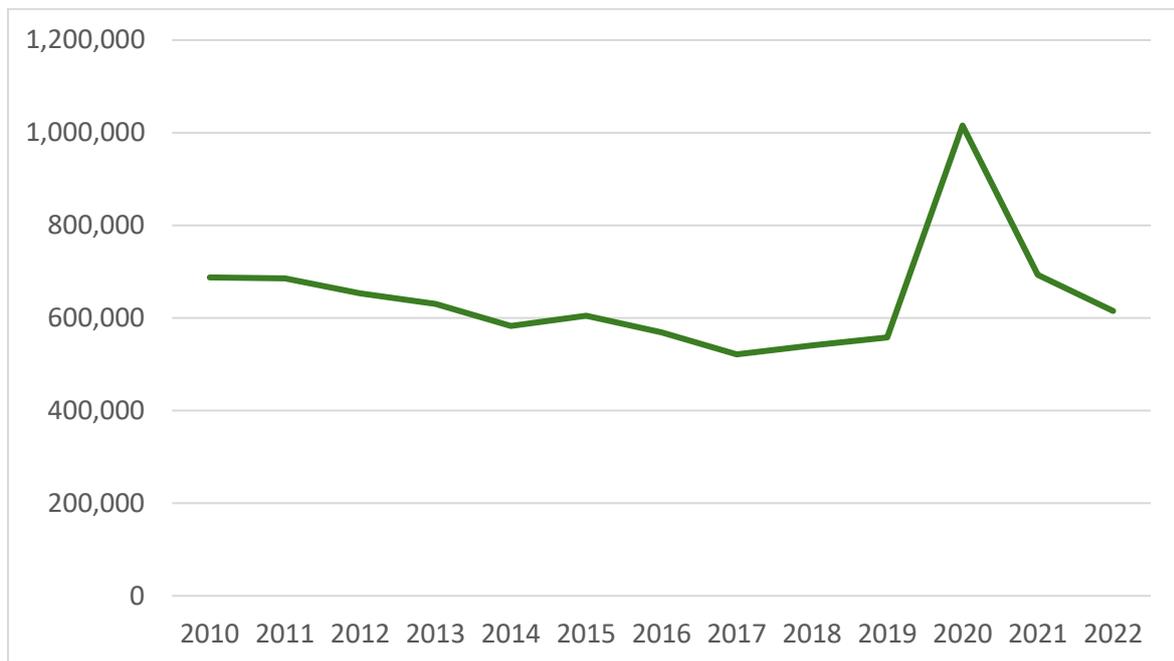
Figure 3: Estimated number children out of school with disabilities ages 5-18



Source: STATS SA General Household Surveys 2010-2022

In fact, the estimated number of all 5-18-year-old children (with or without a disability) who are out-of-school has been around 600 000. This also serves to put in perspective how far from reality the 600 000 statistic was.

Figure 4: Estimated number of ALL children out of school 5-18 (With or without a disability)



Source: STATS SA General Household Surveys 2010-2022

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that the numbers of out-of-school children with disabilities have remained fairly steady over the years. We should categorically retract and reject the problematic 600 000 statistic, and guard against any spurious conclusions that things have improved tremendously since that statistic was produced.