

Key messages:

- In 2007, 33 percent of households surveyed in Zambia reported unsafe disposal of the feces of their youngest child under age three—i.e., they were not deposited into a latrine or toilet.
- Even among households with improved toilets or latrines, 11 percent reported unsafe child feces disposal behavior.
- Safe child feces disposal steadily increases with the wealth of the household: only 32 percent of the poorest quintile reports safe disposal compared to 93 percent of the richest quintile.¹

OVERVIEW

Safe disposal of children's feces is as essential as the safe disposal of adults' feces. This brief provides an overview of the available data on child feces disposal in Zambia and concludes with ideas to strengthen safe disposal practices, based on emerging good practice.

The Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) tracks progress toward the Millennium Development Goal 7 target to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. The JMP standardized definition for an improved sanitation facility is one that hygienically separates human excreta from human contact.²

In the latest JMP report, only 43 percent of Zambia's population had access to improved sanitation in 2012.³ This means that 8 million individuals in Zambia lacked improved sanitation in 2012, of which 2.25 million practice open defecation. However, this estimate is based on the household's primary sanitation facility, and may overlook the sanitation practices of young children. In many cases, children may not be able to use an improved toilet or latrine—due to their age and stage of physical development or the safety concerns of their caregivers—even if their household has access to one.

SUMMARY OF CHILD FECES DISPOSAL DATA

In 2007, two thirds (67 percent) of households in Zambia reported that the feces of their youngest child under age three were safely disposed of. Only 18 percent of households in Zambia reported that their youngest child's feces were disposed of into an improved sanitation facility, according to the 2007 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) (see Figure 1). This low percentage of households reporting improved child feces disposal suggests that children under age three have worse sanitation than the country's broader population, where 43 percent use improved sanitation.

In Zambia, households lacking improved sanitation, those in rural areas, and poorer households—as well as households with younger



children—have a higher prevalence of unsafe disposal of child feces (see Figure 2). In 2007, 87 percent of urban households reported safe disposal compared to 52 percent of rural households. Households practicing open defecation reported the highest level of unsafe child feces disposal, at 71 percent. For these 22 percent of households practicing open defecation (i.e., they do not use a latrine), it is possible, but not probable, that they deposit their children's feces into a latrine (see Figure 3 and notes on self-reported data in the "Data Sources" section).

The prevalence of safe feces disposal is fairly similar across age groups in Zambia. After age two, children are increasingly likely to use a toilet/latrine themselves (see Figure 4). At these young ages, the behavior of the child's caregiver is critical to dispose of their feces safely and shape the child's toilet training. The low prevalence of safe disposal in children age four is partly due to the large amount of missing data for this age category; this may reflect the fact that caregivers are no longer as involved and thus not as aware of where their older children defecate.

Safe disposal differs widely across the wealth asset quintiles.⁴ The poorest quintile of households is substantially less likely than richer households to report safe child feces disposal. Indeed, only 33 percent of the poorest quintile reports safe disposal (see Figure 5). Looking at overall sanitation facility coverage for households with children under age three, only 37 percent of the poorest households reported use of any toilet/latrine (improved, shared, or unimproved), compared to

What Is "Safe Disposal" of a Child's Feces?

The safest way to dispose of a child's feces is to help the child use a toilet or latrine or, for very young children, to put or rinse their feces into a toilet or latrine. For the purposes of this brief, these disposal methods are referred to as "safe," whereas other methods are considered "unsafe." By definition, "safe disposal" is only possible where there is access to a toilet or latrine. When a child's feces is put or rinsed into an "improved" toilet or latrine, this is termed "improved child feces disposal."

FIGURE 1 Safe disposal is relatively high, but prevalence of improved disposal is much lower. Percentage of households reporting each feces disposal practice for their youngest child under age three, Zambia, 2007.

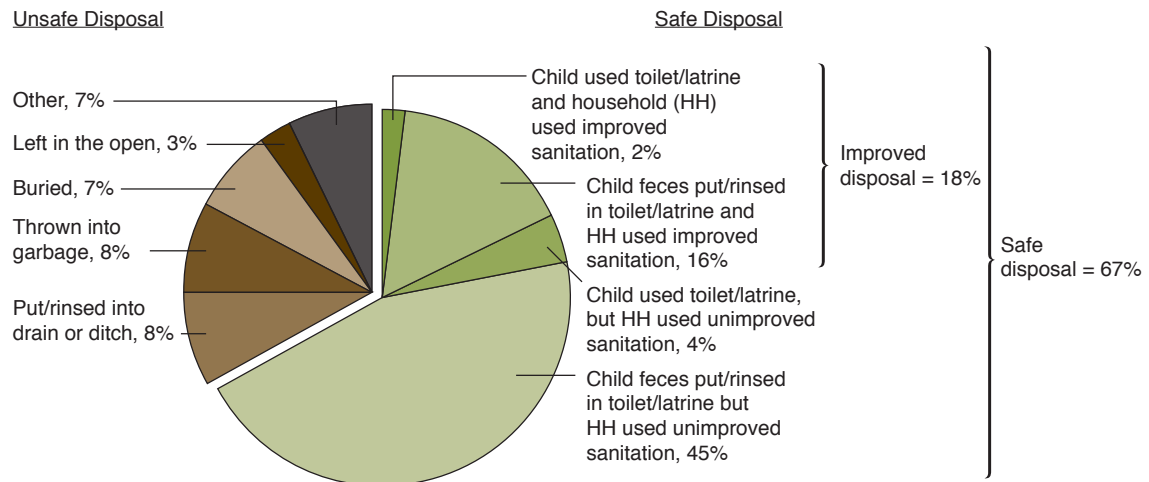
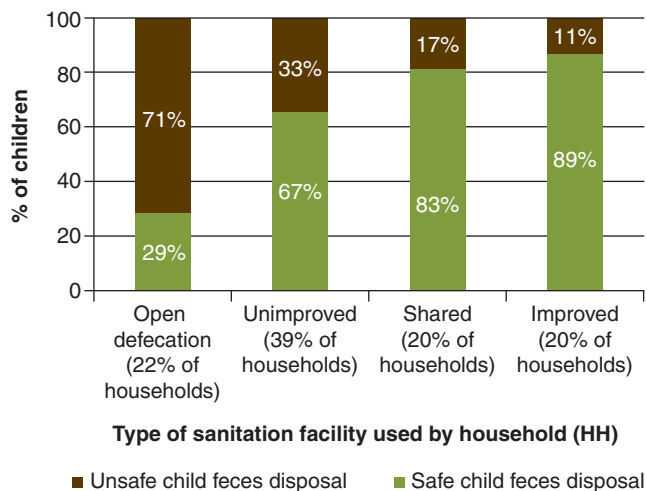


FIGURE 2 Households with access to an improved or shared facility were much more likely to use safe feces disposal. Reported feces disposal practice for households' youngest child under age three, by household sanitation facility type, Zambia, 2007.



100 percent of households in the richest quintile. This is an important factor in child feces disposal: by definition, safe disposal is only possible when there is access to a toilet/latrine.

Behind this national-level data, there is wide variation in child feces disposal practices, with a greater prevalence of unsafe practices among households without access to improved sanitation, in rural areas, and those that are poorer. For example, unsafe disposal in rural areas and among the poorest 20 percent of households is worse than among children overall. Although this brief only focuses on one socioeconomic indicator at a time, applying multiple lenses would show even greater extremes of disparity—with the poorest rural households with the youngest children and no sanitation facility likely reporting the greatest prevalence of unsafe disposal.

What Is the Impact of Unsafe Disposal of Child Feces?

There is widespread belief that the feces of infants and young children are not harmful, but this is untrue. In fact, there is evidence that children's feces could be more risky than adult feces, due to a higher prevalence of diarrhea and pathogens—such as hepatitis A, rotavirus, and *E. coli*—in children than in adults.⁵ Therefore, children's feces should be treated with the same concern as adult feces, using safe disposal methods that ensure separation from human contact and household contamination.

In particular, the unsafe disposal of children's feces may be an important contaminant in household environments, posing a high risk of exposure to young infants.⁶ Poor sanitation can result in substantial health impacts in children, including a higher prevalence of diarrheal disease, intestinal worms, enteropathy, malnutrition, and death. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), most diarrheal deaths in the world (88 percent) are caused by unsafe water, sanitation, or hygiene. More than 99 percent of these deaths are in developing countries, and about eight in every 10 deaths are children.⁷ Diarrhea obliges households to spend significant sums on medicine, transportation, health facility fees, and more, and can mean lost work, wages, and productivity among working household members.⁸ Stunting and worm infestation can reduce children's intellectual capacity, which affects productivity later in life. The WHO estimates that the average IQ loss per worm infection is around 3.75 points.⁹

IDEAS FOR CONSIDERATION

In Zambia, there are few interventions aimed specifically at the safe disposal of children's feces during the first years of life. In general, sanitation for children under age three has been a neglected area of

FIGURE 3 Percentage of households reporting safe feces disposal for their youngest child under age three, Africa.¹⁰

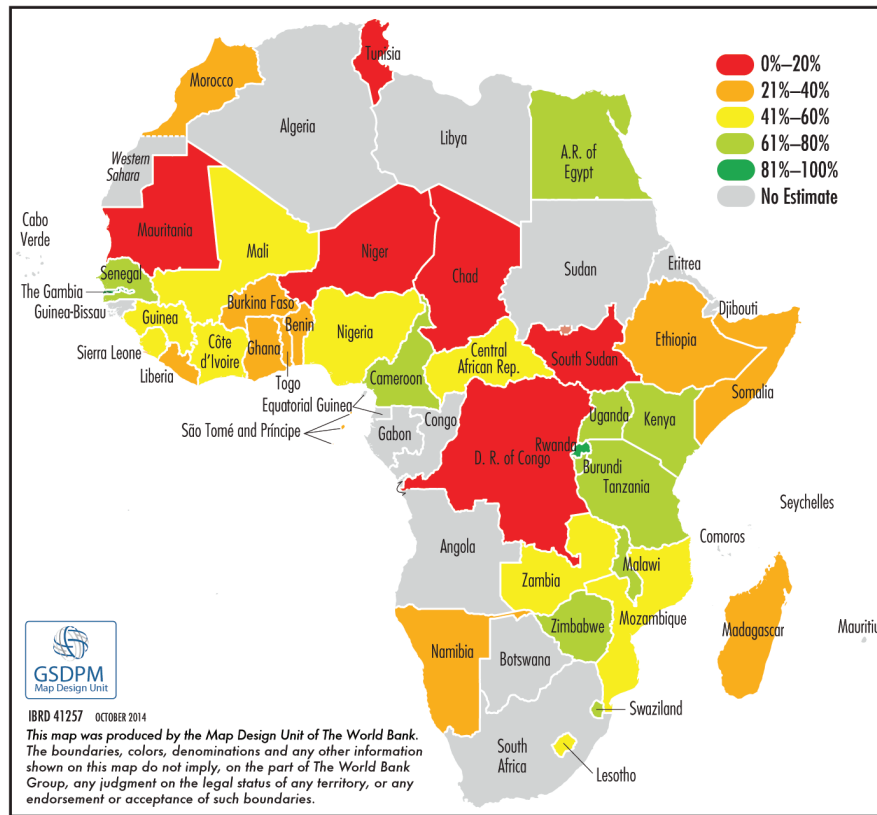
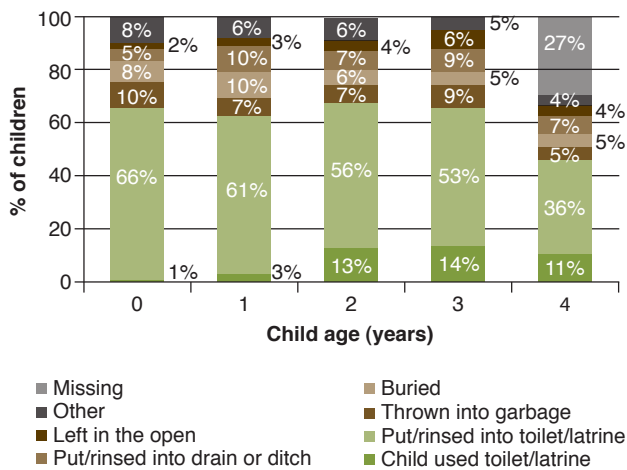
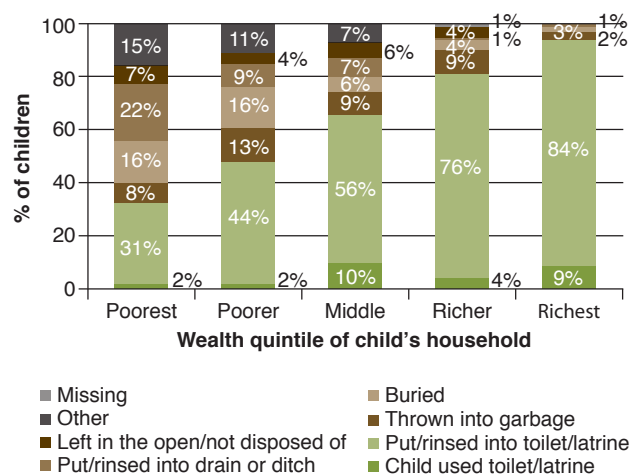


FIGURE 4 Children’s feces disposal behaviors are similar across different age groups. Toilet use begins to increase at age two. Reported feces disposal practice for children of different ages, Zambia, 2007.



policy and program intervention. Given the relatively few programs focusing on children’s sanitation in Zambia and globally, there is not a strong evidence base of effective strategies for increasing the safe disposal of children’s feces. Significant knowledge gaps must be filled before comprehensive, practical evidence-based policy and program guidance will be available. Nevertheless, organizations and governments interested in improving the management of children’s feces could consider:

FIGURE 5 Safe child feces disposal steadily increases with increasing wealth. Reported feces disposal practice for households’ youngest child under age three, by household wealth quintile, Zambia, 2007.



- Conducting formative research to understand the behavioral drivers and barriers to safe child feces disposal
- Strengthening efforts to change the behavior of caregivers through programs that encourage cleaning children after defecation, potty training children, and using appropriate methods to transport feces into a toilet/latrine as well as handwashing with soap after fecal contact and before preparing food or feeding a child



- Exploring opportunities to integrate child sanitation into existing interventions that target caregivers of young children, such as including key messages in antenatal/newborn care materials and infant and young child feeding guidance provided to parents, ensuring midwives' training includes information on safe child feces disposal, and integrating child sanitation information into early childhood development materials and preschool programs
- Partnering with the private sector to improve feces management tools, such as potties, diapers, tools for retrofitting latrines for child use, and scoopers
- Improving the enabling environment for management of children's feces, by including specific child feces related criteria in open defecation free (ODF) verification protocols and in national sanitation policies, strategies, or monitoring mechanisms.

DATA SOURCES

Unless otherwise specified, all analysis in this brief is based on child feces disposal behavior self-reported by the child's mother or caregiver in the 2005 Zambia DHS, which is the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) or DHS available for Zambia that records child feces disposal behaviors.

The MICS and DHS collect data in a generally harmonized manner and hence are the basis for this country profile series. However, whereas the DHS collects data on the youngest child under age five living with the mother for each household, the MICS collects data on all children under age three who live with the respondent (mother or caretaker). To maximize comparability, we restricted all analysis to children under age three in all figures, except Figure 4. However, the fact that the MICS data are for all children in the age group and the DHS data are only for the youngest per household, means that some limitations to the comparability of the MICS and DHS data presented in Figure 3 remain. The map in Figure 3 presents MICS data for the following countries: Central African Republic, Chad, DRC, Gambia, Ghana, Malawi, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, and Tunisia; DHS data is presented for the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cote D'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda, Sao tome and Principe, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

It is likely that self-reports overestimate safe disposal.¹¹ In Bangladesh, for example, although 22 percent of children reportedly either used a toilet/latrine or their feces were put or rinsed into the toilet/latrine (according to MICS 2006), a structured observation of behavior conducted under UNICEF's Sanitation, Hygiene Education and Water Supply in Bangladesh (SHEWA-B) program in 2007 found that only 9 percent of subjects disposed of child feces into a toilet/specific pit.¹² Regardless of this issue, self-reports are currently regarded as the most efficient method for gauging safe disposal of children's feces.

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- 2 The JMP has established a set of standardized definitions to categorize improved sanitation, which are used to track progress toward Millennium Development Goal 7. However, these definitions are not always the same as those used by national governments. See *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: Update 2014*.
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NOTES

We're interested in your thoughts. Have you found different evidence of what works through your own programming? If you have thoughts to share, or know of a program that is encouraging the safe disposal of child feces, please contact WSP at worldbankwater@worldbank.org or UNICEF at WASH@unicef.org so that we can integrate your information into future program guidance.

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