

## **Predicting the social consequences of orphanhood in South Africa**

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**Description:**

This paper examines and questions the predictions found in the academic and policy literature of social breakdown in Southern Africa in the wake of anticipated high rates of orphanhood caused by the AIDS epidemic. Analysis of the logic underlying these predictions reveals four causal relationships necessary to fulfil such dramatic and apocalyptic predictions: 1. High AIDS mortality rates will produce high numbers of orphans. 2. These orphans will become children who do not live in appropriate social environments to equip them for adult citizenship. 3. Poor socialization will mean that children orphaned by AIDS will not live within society's moral codes (becoming, for example, street children or juvenile delinquents). 4. Large numbers of such 'asocial' children will precipitate a breakdown in the social fabric. Evidence for each of these steps in the argument is scrutinised using available data from Southern Africa and other regions that have moved further through the epidemic's cycle. The paper demonstrates strong evidence for the first step, although variable definitions of 'orphan' make it difficult to draw accurate comparisons over time and space. Evidence for the second step is found to be mixed in terms of outcomes of AIDS orphanhood for child well-being, and very weak in the lack of reference to pervading socio-cultural patterns of child-rearing and the economic positions of families onto which AIDS is mapped. Data to substantiate the third step are anecdotal at best, and no research is able to demonstrate a link between the long term effects of AIDS orphanhood and rising rates of juvenile delinquency. Arguments made towards the fourth step are shown to be based heavily on notions of the 'correct' social and physical environments for children, and on unsubstantiated fears of alternatives to these. There is no evidence from countries where numbers of AIDS orphans are already high to suggest that their presence is precipitating social breakdown. The paper argues that such apocalyptic predictions are unfounded and ill-considered. By misrepresenting the problems faced by children and their families, attention is distracted from the multiple layers of social, economic and psychological disadvantage that affect individual children, families and communities.

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