

Who is “Vulnerable”?  
The Role of Context in Shaping  
Foster-Children’s & Orphans’ School Enrollment in sub-Saharan Africa

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## ABSTRACT

In sub-Saharan Africa, traditional child fostering practices and the increasing number of double orphans lead many school-aged children to live with non-parental caregivers. Existing research concludes that foster-children and orphans are “vulnerable” to poor childhood outcomes, but these studies are limited by their focus on the household-level. This study expands the current literature on the determinants of school enrollment among foster-children and orphans by considering one contextual factor that may shape the school experiences of foster-children and orphans: the contextual prevalence of orphans in the area where they live. We look beyond the household setting and evaluate whether the prevalence of orphans shapes the educational experiences of foster-children and orphans. We use Demographic & Health Survey (DHS) and Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) data to first provide a contemporary assessment of the percentage of children age 0-14 years old that are fostered and orphaned in sub-Saharan Africa. We then estimate multilevel logistic regression models for 322,285 children age 6 to 14 years old living in 312 distinct sub-national regions to test competing hypotheses about whether living among a greater prevalence of orphans lessens or heightens the likelihood of foster-children’s and orphans’ school enrollment.

In sub-Saharan Africa, traditional child fostering practices<sup>3</sup> and the increasing number of orphans<sup>4</sup> (Bicego, Rutstein, & Johnson, 2003) lead many school-aged children to live with non-parental caregivers. Existing research shows that foster-children (Townsend, Madhavan, Tollman, Garenne, & Kahn, 2002; Urassa et al., 1997) and orphans (Bicego, et al., 2003; Case, Paxson, & Ableidinger, 2004) have poorer educational outcomes compared to their peers who reside with their living parents.

There are two predominant explanations for foster-children and orphans poor educational outcomes. The first explanation is that these children often reside in poorer households and limited resources hinder their educational opportunities (Foster et al., 1995; Lloyd & Blanc, 1996). The second explanation is that non-parental caregivers are universally less willing to invest in foster-children's and orphans' schooling compared to their biological children (Case, et al., 2004). Both of these household-level explanations conclude that foster-children and orphans are universally vulnerable to poor school outcomes, regardless of the broader context in which they live.

The current focus on household-level explanations for foster-children's and orphans' poor school outcomes may be ignoring important contextual factors that shape foster-children's and orphans' school experiences (Ainsworth & Filmer, 2006). There is evidence of considerable cross-national variation in the influence of orphanhood on children's schooling (Ainsworth & Filmer, 2006; Lloyd & Blanc, 1996). While these studies do not test potential explanations for this variability, additional sub-national research has linked a higher

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<sup>3</sup> In the current study, we define foster-children as those who live separately from both of their living parents. Some studies refer to orphans as "fostered" children. Here, we only consider "foster-children" as those who are residing separately with their living parents, a more exclusive definition. This definitional operation mirrors the one used by Urassa et al (1997), and allows us to draw comparisons between foster-children and orphans to gain a better understanding of how the broader orphan crises may be experienced differently by foster-children and orphans.

<sup>4</sup> We refer to the contextual prevalence of orphans throughout this paper, but we specifically measure the prevalence of double orphans (children whose mother and father are both deceased) and "virtual double orphans" (single orphans (maternal or paternal) who do not reside with their living parent) at the contextual-level.

prevalence of HIV and orphans and the decline in the prevalence of foster-children, suggesting that the higher prevalence of orphans is placing strain on the extended families' ability to fulfill traditional fostering obligations (Grant & Yeatman *forthcoming*). The current paper expands this line of research on the potential role of context by evaluating if and how the contextual prevalence of orphans shapes the school experiences of foster-children and orphans.

We use data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) collected in 31 countries. Though there is important cross-national variation in the prevalence of orphans, there is also sizeable intra-country variation in the prevalence of orphans. To address the heterogeneity that is masked when looking at the country-level, and to more closely approximate the bounded spaces in which African families live, we use subnational regions as our contextual unit of focus. We begin by first providing a descriptive overview of the prevalence of foster-children and orphans across the 31 selected countries. We then estimate a series of three-level logistic regression models for 322,285 children 6-14 years old living in 312 distinct sub-national regions of sub-Saharan Africa to evaluate competing hypotheses about whether the contextual prevalence of orphans shapes foster-children's and orphans' likelihood of school enrollment.