

**BREAKING THE NET:
FAMILY STRUCTURE AND STREET CHILDREN IN ZAMBIA**

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March 25, 2009

Abstract

The safety net provided by the African extended family has traditionally been the basis for the assertion that “*there is no such thing as an orphan in Africa*” (Foster, 2000). The assumption is that even families lacking sufficient resources to properly care for existing members are predisposed to take in orphans. Chronic poverty, coupled with an increasing malaria burden and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, has put this safety-net under severe strain thus giving rise to an increasing number of orphans and vulnerable children and, in the extreme, to the phenomenon of “street children.”

Drawing on original fieldwork in the slums of Ndola in Northern Zambia we studied the role of family structure in caring for vulnerable children and tried to isolate those features of the child’s nuclear and extended family that put him most at risk of ending up on the streets. In the three selected slums, we interviewed a random sample of families known to have originated street children as well as all their immediate neighbors. From the set of neighbors, we identified a set of control families – those with children who were idle during the day – who were similar on most observable dimensions to the families with street children. We then used linear and non-linear probability models to isolate those characteristics of individual children and families that contributed to their winding up on the street. This unique dataset is an important source of information on the failure of the informal safety net – i.e. the extended family – to prevent the growing phenomenon of “street children.” Although this phenomenon has been rarely (if ever) studied in the economic literature, it represents a potentially important contributor to the intergenerational transmission of poverty through a loss of human capital accumulation in current and future generations.

We find that older, male children and children in families with a household head who is in poor health are more likely to wind up on the street. Interestingly, children who belong to female-headed households or have fathers who have many sisters are significantly less likely to end up on the street. In contrast, the educational level, age and employment status of the head of household has little impact on the likelihood that a child takes to the street. These findings highlight the critical role that women play in poor countries, suggesting potential policy recommendations for intervention.

Keywords: Africa, poverty, extended family, orphans, street children, human capital.
JEL Classifications: I3, J12, J13, O12.