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## Effects of non-resident fathering on children: A case of selected households in the Hillcrest community, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*Non-resident fathering that is the absence of fathers permanently in households is a growing socio-economic concern in the world at large and South Africa in particular. However, studies conducted on non-resident fathering concentrated on marital satisfaction, perception, divorce and separation. This paper explored the effects of non-resident fathers on the children in the Hillcrest community in Alice town, Eastern Cape. A qualitative research methodology was utilised and 30 participants (single mothers/caregivers, non-resident fathers, social workers) took part in the study. Data was collected using semi-structured and unstructured interviews and analysed thematically. The themes that emerged were the absence of role model for children, children manifest psychosocial problems and deteriorating levels of poverty and living conditions in households without fathers. The theme also identified was a children's educational performance, lower compared to those with fathers in households. The study found that the absence of fathers on the lives of children resulted to psychosocial problems such as stress, depression, violence and substance abuse, which prevented them to establish trusting relationships. The study concluded that anxiety, depression and stress lead to the disruption of the children's education. This study recommended that occupational training and life skills programme should be introduced by the government and other stakeholders involved to empower single parent (mothers) as this might provide the platform for the mothers to bring up their children properly.*

**KEY TERMS:** Children, fathering, household, non-resident, single parent, South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

Non-resident fathering has emerged as one of the greatest socio-economic problems in the world, most especially in developing countries for more than four decades. Non-resident fathers refers to as biological fathers (employed or unemployed) of children with whom they do not share the same home address permanently but have access to the children. It also includes those fathers who are separated or divorced, those who are incarcerated and those who were never married to the child's mother. Children who grow up with a non-resident father can suffer lasting damage. They are more likely to end up in poverty or drop out of school. The absence of fathers in households leads to crime and delinquency, premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock teen births. Despite legal frameworks introduced by the South African government to protect children from non-resident fathers, children continue to be neglected and abused. A qualitative research methodology and exploratory research design were employed in the study. The African family theory (Ukama theory) in IsiXhosa (Usapho theory) was used to scrutinise data and informed the study. The theory is all about familyhood. The African family theory states that each family member (father) like the case of South Africa has a role to play in the family, most importantly children, extended family and community. If a member fails to play their role, the family will not function effectively. Most families consist of parents, or a parent, and their children and sometime extended relatives may come to stay if the financial situation requires it and families look after each other. The first section introduced the topic. The second part is the background and the third section the literature review. The methodology is the fourth part used in the paper and the results the fifth section. The sixth section the study's discussion and the seventh part the recommendations. The eight section the conclusion of the study.

## BACKGROUND

South Africa is reported to have among the highest prevalence of non-resident fathering in Africa, second only to Namibia (Department of Social Development, 2021; Statistics, South Africa, 2020; African Union, 2021). Colonialism, the decline in marriage rates, high divorce rates, apartheid, poverty, migration labour systems and forced migration are some of the causes of non-resident fathering (DSD, 2021; Stats SA, 2013; 2020; United Nations Children Fund, 2021). It is estimated that 2.13 million children are fatherless, and 9 million grow-up without fathers (Statistics South Africa, 2013; Ratele et al., 2012; Ramadimetie, 2020; Reetsang, 2020; AU, 2021; Modula, 2022). Stats SA (2021) report shows that only 2% of the children lived with their fathers and only 19% of the children under the age of five neither live with their biological mother nor father. Children under the age of 18, the Stats SA report revealed that only 31.7% of black children and 51.3% of their coloured counterparts stayed with their biological fathers. In addition, only one third of pre-school children live in the same home with both biological parents (Stats SA, 2021).

The African Union and the government of South Africa has ratified legal frameworks to protect children from non-resident fathers. These include the following: the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child. The African Charter which came into force in 1999 sets out rights and defines principles for the status of children. Article 24 states that every child have the right to maintain a personal relationship and direct contact with both his or her parents, unless that is contrary to his or her interests. Article 16 states that States Parties should introduce legislatives, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of maltreatment, torture among others (AU, 2021). Section 28 of the Bill of Rights (Constitution of 1996 of the Republic of South Africa). Section 28 states that every child has the right to be protected from the maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation as well as basic nutrition, shelter, health care and social services (Ramadimetie, 2020; DSD, 2021). The Children's Act 38 of 2005 introduced to help protect children and make sure that their rights are respected. The Act ensures that children are protected and are taken care of by their parents, no matter who they are, where they live and who takes care of them. It provides that a parent has the following rights and responsibilities towards his/her child that is to care for a child, keep contact with a child; to act as guardian of a child (The Republic of South Africa, 2006; DSD, 2021). In addition, the government has imposed stricter laws for fathers who are not paying maintenance for their children. This carries the same penalty as for unpaid debts. The father's assets can be attached, and he may serve time in jail for defaulting on maintenance of his children. In instances where fathers cannot be traced, the government provides grants for children below the age of 14 who live in poverty and do not have caretakers or guardians (Morrell et al., 2003). However, it seems the legal frameworks are not working because poor health care, maltreatment, neglect, abuse as well as lack of basic nutrition continues to plague children. Few studies to date have explored the effects of non-resident fathers on the children. Those that have been conducted focused on the marital satisfaction, divorce, separation, perception and experiences of support for children, ignoring the effects on children. Therefore, this study sought to bridge that gap by exploring the non-resident fathers' effects on children in the Hillcrest community, Alice town, Eastern Cape. A research on non-resident fathering, hopefully might assist policy makers such as the Department of Social Development and other stakeholders with information they can use in planning and implementing measures aimed at protecting children

from non-resident fathers. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of non-resident fathers on the children in the Hillcrest community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature was obtained from legislation, books, journal articles, memorandum and minutes, published and unpublished theses in relation to non-fathering effects on children. The literature review was done using a thematic approach where themes relevant to the effects of non-resident fathers on the children were provided.

Non-resident fathers that is the absence of fathers in households have adverse effects on children's welfare and wellbeing. When children provisions are not properly met, they become vulnerable and this may affect their present and future life. Children who grow up without fathers suffer from poverty and poor living conditions, psychosocial, cognitive ability and educational achievement effects (Salami and Okeke, 2018; Reetsang, 2020; AU, 2021; Diem-Wille, 2021).

Poverty and poor living conditions remain a major effect suffer from children who do not reside with their father. Bezuidenhout and Joubert (2008) state that children living in single-parent homes are twice more likely to be impoverished compared to those living with both parents. The living conditions of these fatherless street children deteriorate further because of their abuse of psychoactive substances in order to forget their harsh realities (Salami and Okeke, 2018; Hall and Sambu, 2019). Their inadequate living conditions increase their susceptibility to chronic illnesses and sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Children who are coming from households with a non-resident father have a high probability of suffering from some infectious diseases such as rheumatic fever, homophiles influenza, meningitis, gastroenteritis and parasitic diseases due to a lower immunization rate (Richter et al., 2010; Ratele, et al., 2012; AU, 2021; Ngubane, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

Statistics South Africa (2020) states that of the 48.8 % of mothers who never married, 39.7% relied on social grants as their major sources of income. Poverty creates challenges that may be difficult to manage with only one available parent, especially as more single mothers work outside the home (Ritcher and Morrel, 2006; Stats SA, 2021). Tanga and Gutura (2013) underscore that lack of economic support by biological fathers closely relates to child poverty, crime and immoral behaviour which may include stealing and child prostitution. In addition, psychosocial effect is another adverse impact on children who grow up with their fathers. Father absence negatively impacts on the children's psychosocial development (DSD, 2021).

Furthermore, cognitive development and educational performance are another effect suffer from children who do not reside with their father (Makusha and Richter, 2016; Stats SA, 2021). Very often, when fathers are absent, the child's income is reduced and they might be forced to drop out of school (Ramadimetje, 2020). Where income is insufficient, households opt for a living that they can sustain therefore can imply to living in high density suburbs. These areas are highly populated and children without a father model can lose sight of the importance of education through adapting to the standards (gangsterism) of *ghetto* life (UNICEF, 2021). Although, the contribution of authors such as Richter and Morrel, Makusha and Richter, Ratele et al., Tanga and Gutura views can be commended, however, their studies concentrated on the marital satisfaction, divorce, separation, perception and experiences of support for children, ignoring the impact on children. Hence, this study looks at non-resident fathers' effects on children in the Hillcrest community.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research method and exploratory design to get a better understanding of non-resident fathering effects on the children (Chilisa, 2019). A sample size of 30 participants participated in the study, and they comprised of single mothers or caregivers of children, non-resident fathers and social workers. Eighteen (18) single mothers or caregivers, ten (10) non-resident fathers and two (2) social workers participated in the study. A purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the participants. Semi-structured and unstructured interview guide were used to collect data from the participants. The questions were structured in such a way so as to allow the participants to share their understanding of non-resident fathers' effects on children. The semi-structured interview guide was used to collect information from the participants while unstructured interviews were employed to collect data from the social workers. In terms of analysis, all the interviews were audio-tape recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were thoroughly cross-examined by reading of the text in order to identify themes and categories. Emerging significant components and recurrent themes or narratives were described. The transcriptions were then analysed using thematic analysis (Reviere, 2001, Chilisa et al., 2017). The ethical clearance was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Fort Hare. Participation for the study was completely voluntary and the participants were assured of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity (Chilisa, 2019).

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study according to the themes that emerged. The themes that emerged are the absence of role model for children, children manifest psychosocial problems and deteriorating levels of poverty and living conditions in households without fathers. Children's educational performance, lower compared to those with fathers in households was also a theme identified.

The first theme that emerged during data analysis was the absence of role model for children in Hillcrest community.

### ***Theme 1: Absence of role model for children***

All the caregivers/single mothers, non-resident fathers and social workers reported that the absence of role model, the father decreases communication and cognitive abilities for children. Father's presence in a household was crucial in instilling moral values to children. One caregiver had this to say:

*I am the leader of the house, the leader of my wife, the leader of my kids, although I do not reside with my children. I give my kids good upbringing. I cannot just let them do their own thing.*

Another single mother mentioned:

*I am a follower of God; you can say a Christian ... I want for my kids to grow up and understand Christianity. I live in that because the world out there today, I am sorry for the word, it is crap, and I do not want my kids to end up like the people outside that they do all wrongs. I want them to stay on a right path and also that they can have good friends through Christianity, not that they go anywhere and do a lot of rubbish things, you know.*

Furthermore, the non-resident fathers reported that they assisted their children with school homework and act as caregivers. The non-resident fathers shared their experiences:

*As a father I am a very happy man because I am involved in my children's lives. I played with my children and assisted them with school homework whilst my wife is busy with her work projects. I felt the relationship with my wife was growing apart and we decided to divorce.*

*One of my daughters was pregnant. I make sure supported throughout the pregnancy. We also share the role of caregiving and relieving the mothers of looking after the baby. We assisted with nappy-changing, feeding and bathing of the babies.*

### ***Theme 2: Children manifest psychosocial problems***

All the single mothers, non-resident fathers and social workers indicated that the children who grew up without their fathers exhibited deep psychosocial problems. The extracts from the single mothers reveal the following:

*My children specifically the boys have problems establishing healthy relationships in the community. They have behavioural problems and also an intimidating persona. They tend to be less sociable, and this is probably because they are always teased by others relating to the whereabouts of their father and they become very emotional about it. As a result, they withdraw from others and choose to play by themselves"*

*During adolescence, the father is needed most by the child. The absence of the father has adverse effects on teenage children most importantly boys as they fail to get proper guidance relating to puberty and sexuality. Teenage boys who are fatherless may end up randomly impregnating girls or worse still getting infected with the STDS, HIV and AIDS, particularly. Boys rarely share their physiological development with their mothers and as a result, they tend to learn on their own.*

Furthermore, during interviews with the social workers, it was revealed that daughters who grow without their fathers have emotional wounds that can manifest in promiscuous behaviour. The social workers shared their experiences:

*Females without father figures often become desperate for male attention. Females who lose their father figures to divorce or abandonment seek much more attention from men and had more physical contact with boys their age than girls whose fathers are present. These females constantly seek refuge for their*

*missing father and as a result there is a constant need to be accepted by men from whom they aggressively seek attention.*

*Losing a father through divorce or separation altered the child's perception of men, and they may develop abandonment issues and have trouble forming lasting relationships with men, since fatherless girls are seeking attention from males, this may explain their promiscuous behaviour. This may also explain the increase in teenage pregnancy, which can result in interrupted education.*

Also, the caregivers revealed that their children thought that their fathers do not want to provide for them because they do not love them. One of the caregivers reported:

*I never see my dad anymore. My parents divorced when I was four. I always thought I was daddy's girl. I would try to arrange to see him as often as I grew older. My mother told me we were better off without him, but we were not. I dropped out of school at 10 and I started to work in a tuck-shop. My life has never been the same, at 15 I was impregnated and now I have two children who do not have a father. I see my children going through the same pain I went through, I wish I would have done things differently if I had the opportunity.*

### **Theme 3: Deteriorating levels of poverty and living conditions in households without fathers**

All the single mothers/caregivers reported that they and the children live in poor living conditions thus contributing to the spread of disease. They indicated that the high unemployment rates and the inadequate Child Support Grants has forced some girls to get involved in prostitution at a tender age and boys into robbery in an effort to sustain themselves financially and to fit into the social classes of their friends coming from families with both parents. The caregivers shared their experiences:

*Most of the households in the Hillcrest community are headed by single women who had less access to education and employment. Most of us and our children are living in Reconstruction Development Programme (RDP) houses and there is no adequate water and electricity and the sleeping arrangements regarding children were far from satisfactory. I share the same room with my two children. The boy is 11 years old and the girl is 7 years old. I do not have enough money to rent at least one more room to improve our accommodation and buy food for children. My children are growing up and with time they need their privacy and also as a parent I need it.*

*My 16-year-old boy always complained that he was not having material clothes. Later on, he started to snatch bags, cell phones and groceries from people. He sold these things and bought for himself the material things that he always dreamt about. Subsequently, he has been arrested more than once and is constantly in conflict with the law. Inadequate Child Support Grants and high unemployment rates has forced some girls to get involved in prostitution at a tender age and boys into robbery in an effort to sustain themselves financially and to fit into the social classes of their friends coming from families with both parents.*

### **Theme 4: Children's educational performance lower compared to those with fathers in households**

The majority of the participants interviewed including the social workers indicated that households where fathers are absent children had difficulties at school, hence poor academic performance. One of the non-resident fathers provided the following:

*My first-child left school in grade 11. He lacked school motivation and he performed dismally. A year after he started abusing drugs and got killed in 2010. May be if his father was around he could have assisted him with his studies and encouraged him to stay away from trouble.*

Another single mother reported:

*My girl is excelling at school and her teachers are very pleased with her academic performance, but the boy who is the older child is struggling so much at school and he seems not to be bothered by it.*

However, a small percentage of the single mothers and non-resident fathers indicated that some children showed high competence levels in schools despite the absence of their fathers. According to them, some children even received awards at school and functioned normally in the academic perspective. They further reported that the girls performed much better compared to boys in schools. The reason being that boys are the most affected by the absence of their father.

## DISCUSSION

The absence of fathers in households is a serious socio-economic concern in the world, South Africa and Hillcrest community in particular. It was found that the absence of a father, as a role model to act as a leader by instilling moral values hinders positive behaviours for children. A father leads the children into righteousness and teaches them how to behave. Fathers instil confidence and provide the platform for children to develop responsibly by instilling moral values to children. Moral values are crucial in any child's life. It enables the child to build a positive character such as respect, kindness, humility and compassion. Moral values can allow children differentiate between good and bad and right and wrong. A father's role lays the foundation for the child's personality, life choices, overall behaviour good mental health. Good mental health is a vital part of child development because it enables children to build positive social, emotional, behaviour, thinking and communication skills. The absence of role model such as the father in a child's life could lead to psychosocial problems such stress, anxiety, depression and mental and cognitive reservation. It can also affect the strength of their social, physical, mental and emotional health. This finding is in line with Ratele et al. (2012), Hall and Sambu (2019) and DSD (2021) studies which acknowledge that a father's involvement and love build a child's confidence and contributes to the sense that is worth loving. Father's presence in a household instils moral values and self-esteem in children which are key elements of academic performance.

This study hinges on the African family theory (Ukama theory) which supports the finding. The theory highlights the importance each member of the family role plays in a household. If a member for instance, the father fails to play their role, the household will not function effectively. The theory demonstrates that the father's role in households is crucial in providing love and security for children which prevents stress and depression (Murove, 2006; Mhaka, 2010).

The study found that not having a resident father, children most particularly boys suffer from psychosocial issues such depression, substance abuse, violence and anxiety. This affects the way children interact with friends and family. The study indicated that females' children who lose their resident fathers may develop abandonment issues and trouble establishing lasting relationship with men. The absence of healthy relationship leads to the lack of trust, respect, honesty and open communication between the children, the parents and other children. Experiencing emotional abandonment in childhood can make a child feel ashamed, anxious, distrustful and inadequate. Also, it can result to teen pregnancy, school failure, delinquency and physical health problems. This also lowers self-perception and diminishes their self-esteem and compromise their physical and emotional security which might lead to poor academic performance. Psychosocial problems affect how children deal with life's stresses and challenges. The finding is consistent with Hall and Sambu (2019) and Ngubane (2021) studies which found that children raised without their fathers develop psychosocial problems. These children tend to exhibit lower mental and emotional wellbeing and are more likely to commit suicide. Also, DSD (2021) and UNICEF (2021) studies reveal that the absence of fathers creates an emotional gap which makes children become timid and fearful of establishing a healthy relationship with other children. This lowers self-esteem and compromise their physical and emotional security. Also, the finding is in consonant with the African family theory utilized in the study. The theory demonstrates that if a member of a family such as the father plays a role and reside in a household, this might help cater for the psychosocial problems such as stress, hopelessness, hostility and depression in children (Murove, 2006; Mhaka, 2010).

It was found that children in households without fathers lived in deteriorating living conditions and poverty. Children lived in RDP houses where there was no access to water and sleeping arrangements. Lack of access to water leads to the spread of diseases such as diarrhea and cholera. Water scarcity leads to hunger, starvation and increase of mortality (infant) because there is no water for crops and animals to thrive. Inadequate food and access to clean water leads to malnutrition which increases the children's vulnerability to diseases and stifles their physical and mental development and in extreme cases death at a young age. Lack of sleeping arrangement among children results to sleep deficiency which linked to chronic health problems such as heart disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure and depression. The single mothers and caregivers could hardly provide for their children because they were not employed and were not getting financial support from the fathers of their children. When income is insufficient, households opt for a living that they can sustain which in most cases, in suburbs where the living condition is deplorable. Poverty has adverse effects on health, education and higher rates of criminality/victimization in the community. Also, poverty and poor living conditions deterred children to have access educational opportunities. Parents often have to choose between providing the basic needs of the child or sending their children to school. Even parents do not have to pay tuition fees, school comes with the added costs of books, uniforms, supplies, and/or exam fees. This finding is in support with Tanga and Gutura (2013) who state that the lack of economic support by non-resident fathers lead to child poverty, crime and immoral behaviour such as child prostitution. The non-participation of biological fathers in the socio-economic lives of their children strongly correlates of delinquency, low self-esteem and resentment of fathers with children. Also, the finding agrees with the African family theory employed in the study. The theory demonstrates that if fathers act as role

models to their children and are present in households this will improve income for children hence, a reduction of poverty incidence and upliftment of living conditions (Murove, 2006; Mhaka, 2010).

Where fathers are absent children struggle academically. Some drop out from school and others start abusing drugs. Children without resident fathers usually score lower grades in schools and a few of them managed to proceed to higher grades. Poor academic performance results to poor learning mentality, lack of motivation for learning, lack of interest in learning, and a weak willingness to learn. In addition, the children suffer from low self-esteem and empathy and thus prone to high-risk behaviours including drug use, truancy, and criminal activity. The prevalent conditions in cognitive achievement owe it to the socio-economic plight. The finding is consistent with Stats SA (2021) and Ngubane (2021) studies which acknowledge that children's educational achievement is affected when their fathers are absent. The absence of a father entails decreased finance in the household which leads to the deterioration of children's educational achievement. The African family theory states that a member of a family (father) contribution in households provides affection and safety for children. A father presence in a household would enable the child to experience positive feelings which could improve academic performance (Mhaka, 2010).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations were made to mitigate and promote the protection of children from non-resident fathering. It is recommended that the role of the father and mother of children should be clearly defined as this might enable them to bring up the child properly. Fathers by divine design are head of their families in righteousness and love. They are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. Where both parents are available, they should be responsible for decision making. Cases where the father is absent, the mother or the caregiver should be responsible for the decision making on behalf of the child. It also recommended that single parent most particularly mothers should be empowered by the government and other stakeholders involved as this will enable them to raise well-adjusted children. In other words, empowerment might provide the platform for the mothers to bring up their children properly. This can be done through the use of various strategies such as occupational training and life skills programme which will allow these women to generate their own income and thereby be able to protect and care for their children. Marital therapy focussing on the non-resident father, abandoned child, and the reunification of fathers, mothers and their children through family therapy might help limit the psychosocial impact on the child. Also, communities including the government and other stakeholders should work together via social workers to highlight the importance of fathers and introduce mechanisms that can support fathers thus the number of children being abandoned might reduce.

## CONCLUSION

Non-resident fathering is a growing socio-economic concern in South Africa at large and Hillcrest community in particular. The study found that children without resident fathers, faced psychosocial problems such stress, anxiety, depression and mental and cognitive reservation. These children find it difficult to establish trusting relationships. Also, poverty and living conditions were another effect on children without fathers. Due the absence of fathers, children live in deplorable conditions, thus contributing to the spread of disease. Poverty and poor living condition have adverse effects on health, education and higher rates of criminality in the community. These stifled the physical and mental development of children in the Hillcrest community. Where fathers are absent, children struggle academically. Some drop out from school and others start abusing drugs. It is imperative for government policies, practitioners and caregivers to focus on enhancing the children's independence and self-reliance to address maladjustment behaviours that emanate from a lack of fatherly guidance, support and control.

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in any other journal. The Journal (AJSW) has the exclusive right to publish the work for the full length of the copyright period.



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