

Research Brief 8: School enrolment and drop-out among vulnerable rural Zambian children*

This is no 9 of a series of briefs providing new insights on the wellbeing of rural children in Sub-Saharan Africa, a previously much under-researched population. Findings are derived from a longitudinal (2008-2010) controlled study in 5 communities of Kafue District, Zambia. This study was aimed at evaluating and developing a results-based intervention programme focussed on the interface between psychosocial wellbeing and livelihood. In addition, the study identified particular risk and protective factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable children.

According to the Zambian Central Statistical Office (2007), 17% of primary school-age children within the Lusaka Province of Zambia do not attend school. This brief examines the circumstances which contribute to school drop-out among rural Zambian children, and identifies economic and social daily stressors as main risk factors.

Research Questions

- What is the prevalence of school drop-out in a population of vulnerable rural children?
- What factors promote school drop out?
- What are the self reported reasons for school drop out?
- Do children who drop out of school have lower levels of psychosocial wellbeing?

Research Methodology

- Standardised interviews with children in 2008 (10-18 years) and 2010 (12-20)
- 747 participants (50% girls, 50% orphans, 11% other vulnerable, 39% non-vulnerable).
- School drop-out is defined as change in self-reported enrolment status between baseline and follow-up data collection 2 years later (includes only participants who were initially enrolled at baseline).
- Completing grade 9 was considered as successfully finishing school.
- Standardised measures of socio-demographic, socio-economic and psychosocial variables
- Multivariate logistic regression modelling was used

* In this study, participants were aged 10-20

¹ These figures are not directly comparable with national statistics which give net attendance ratios for primary school age (7-13) and secondary school age (14-18) (ZDHS, 2007).

² Primary school age in Zambia covers grades 1-7, but grades 1-9 can be attended in basic government schools.

Key Findings

1. Prevalence of school drop-out among vulnerable rural children

School enrolment figures¹ are consistent with national estimates for rural areas of Lusaka province:

- Of the originally enrolled participants who were supposed to still be in school, 84% of (10-18 years) were still school-going 2 years later (aged 12-20); 16% had dropped out prematurely². There were no differences observed in terms of gender.
- 93% of school-going children were enrolled in government schools and 7% were enrolled in community schools (figure 1).

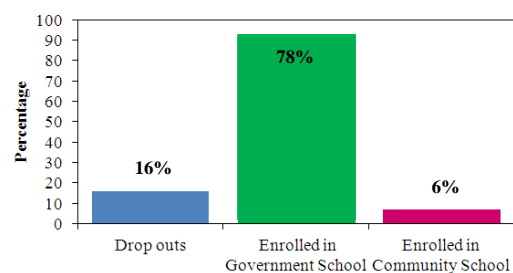


Figure 1: School drop-out and school type

Vulnerable children are not less likely to be enrolled than other children.

- Orphans and children with an elderly and/or chronically ill caregiver have comparable enrolment rates to non-vulnerable children.
- Age-corrected school grade reached is the same for orphans, vulnerable and non-vulnerable children.

- Children from households with lower socio-economic status were more likely to attend community schools than those from household with higher socio-economic status. Community schools could be a buffer for poverty based school drop-out.

2. Factors that promote school drop out

Factors associated with school drop-out:

Children who drop out from school receive less support from their primary caregivers and friends and are less integrated in their peer group than school-going children. They also experience higher levels of stigma, hunger and daily stress.

Factors that predict school drop-out:

Factors associated with school drop-out were tested as predictors (multivariate logistic regression). When compared, only two factors effectively predicted drop out:

- **Age:** School drop-out is more common in older children (16 to 20 years) (figure 2).

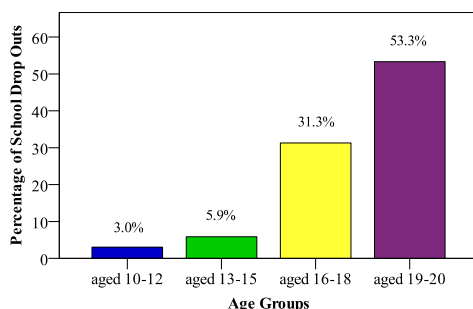


Figure 2: Age and school drop out

- **Daily stress:** The level of current daily stress experienced by children also predicts school drop-out. The daily stressors that best predict school drop-out are: having to worry about school money, excessive household chores and having to look for piece work.

Interesting non-predictors: Household level poverty, quality of primary care and Enrolment in a community school did not predict school drop-out.

3. Self-reported reasons for school drop out by participants:

- The most important reason for school drop out mentioned by youth was 'financial

problems' (70%) followed by 'pregnancy or marriage' (24%) which was mentioned by girls only.

- Other, less frequent reasons were 'failing exams', 'household duties', 'Illness', 'distance to school', 'loss of interest', 'completion of school', and 'starting a job'.

4. School drop outs have lower levels of psychosocial well-being:

School drop outs show lower satisfaction with life, are less positive about their future perspectives and have higher levels of depression than non drop outs.

Conclusions:

- **Zambian education policies that promote school attendance have been successful in ensuring enrolment and attendance.**
- **However, challenges remain to keep these children enrolled until Grade 9.**
- **Interventions should focus on older children, as they drop out more often.**
- **Daily stressors such as excessive chores, looking for piece work and worries about school fees were found to be the main predictors of school drop-out.**
- **The predominant self-reported reason for school drop-out was a lack of financial means. It therefore seems insufficient just to pay school fees, as other indirect costs (books, uniform, etc.) still pose a financial barrier for poorer children.**
- **Marriage and pregnancy were a major self-reported reason for school drop-out among girls. Interventions should be mindful of such gender-specific issues.**
- **While this study sheds some valuable light on the causes of school drop-out, it was not specifically designed to capture or predict school drop-out, and further investigation is still needed.**

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