

AIDS, orphans, crime, and instability

Exploring the linkages

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HIV/AIDS is fast becoming one of the greatest humanitarian and developmental challenges the world has ever seen. In the hardest hit regions of the world, the epidemic is increasing poverty and inequality and reversing decades of improvements in health, education, and life-expectancy. It is also leaving millions of children orphaned and living in situations of acute vulnerability. Yet, even as the international community mobilises in support of these young people, some researchers and practitioners are linking orphaning to crime and instability, suggesting that growing numbers of impoverished orphans may pose a threat to individual and communal security in some countries.

They paint alarming images of economically, politically, and socially disenfranchised hordes of youngsters wreaking havoc on the AIDS-ravaged communities of the future. Such imagery has gained substantial currency over the last five years and, despite a scarcity of empirical data, few discussions on the effects of HIV/AIDS now fail to mention the seemingly common-sense connection between rising numbers of children orphaned by AIDS and increasing levels of crime and conflict.

This connection is generally presented as a neat, linear relationship. Is this the case? Do children orphaned by AIDS represent a unique threat to security and stability or do they pose a predominantly humanitarian problem? Are there factors that may make a difference in determining the ultimate impact of the epidemic for both parentless young people and society? This paper explores these questions in the context of sub-Saharan Africa.

AIDS, orphans, crime, and instability

In the last five years, an enormous amount of time, energy, and resources have gone into raising awareness about the developmental implications

of the HIV/AIDS epidemic for the most severely affected regions and the global community. Many of these effects are only beginning to be felt today and have yet to be accurately measured. It is nevertheless widely agreed that by killing and debilitating large numbers of people, AIDS is increasingly undermining already fragile families, communities, national economies, and governance. It may also be creating or exacerbating social and political disruption and conflict. As argued by Schneider and Moodie:

In much of the developing world, particularly in Africa, AIDS is undermining education and health systems, economic growth, micro-enterprises, policing and military capabilities, political legitimacy, family structures, and overall social cohesion...¹

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There is an abundance of research on the implications of HIV/AIDS at the individual and household level. We already have evidence that the wealth and assets of affected households are being reduced and families are being broken up. In a continent where over half of the population is already under the age of 15, the demographic profiles of heavily affected populations are being skewed by the deaths of exceptionally high numbers of prime-aged adults. The data wears thin at the community, national and regional levels, however. Studies indicate that economic productivity may be declining in some heavily affected countries, but there is very little hard evidence available to illuminate the macro-economic, political, and stability effects of the epidemic.² While often presented as fact, much of our current knowledge in this area is based on informed speculation rather than empirical data. It is argued, however, that by increasing poverty and vulnerability, widening the gap between rich and poor, and undermining the credibility and operational effectiveness of states, AIDS may exacerbate or provoke social volatility, political polarisation, and conflict.

Within this complex web of multi-directional effects, the link is increasingly being made between growing numbers of orphans and crime and instability. As Schneider and Moodie go on to argue:

As economies slump, critical infrastructures fail, family and social networks fragment, and the numbers of deaths and orphaned children escalate, social and political unrest or conflict become all the more likely. [In] a growing number of nations, rootless, uneducated, unnurtured [sic] young people threaten to form a lost generation of potential recruits for crime, military warlords, and terrorists.³

According to this literature there are three main ways in which AIDS-related orphaning may lead to higher levels of crime and instability. The first and most common argument is that the illness and death of parents will leave children scarred and marginalised in ways that predispose them to delinquency and criminal behaviour. Growing poverty, together with the emotional trauma associated with multiple AIDS-related losses and stigma, reduced levels of parental care, and the loss of positive role models will place children at high risk of developing antisocial tendencies. As argued by Schönteich and, more recently, Guest:

Growing up without parents, and badly supervised by relatives and welfare organisations, this growing pool of orphans will be at greater than average risk of engaging in criminal activity...⁴

Adversity can make people strong, but it will be an unusual AIDS orphan who gains anything from the epidemic. The damage from growing up alone will be deep and, in some cases, permanent... child mortality will increase, as will levels of malnutrition, illiteracy and child abuse... the number of children living on the street, fighting wars, committing violent crime, joining gangs and abusing alcohol will rise.⁵

The second argument is that growing numbers of orphans will provide a ready recruitment pool for individuals and organisations wishing to violently challenge the existing socio-political order in African countries. According to Cheek, a swell of young people without family care and formal schooling may constitute an 'extra national' population group vulnerable to co-optation into ethnic warfare. He argues that uneducated, malnourished, and purposeless children represent "a potential army in search of a leader", which if exploited "could effectively destabilise most countries in southern

Africa".⁶ Nielson, in a recent discussion paper on the links between HIV/AIDS, economics and terrorism, argues that:

Without caring adults to protect them, children can be manipulated into doing almost anything. Hundreds of thousands of children as young as ten years old have been forced to fight in Angola, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo and other African countries... some join out of desperation. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has created thousands of households headed by children as young as five, and armed groups are often the only entities that can provide children with the basic necessities...⁷

A third less common but emergent theme is that the demographic change brought about by the epidemic, specifically an overrepresentation of adolescents and young adults in heavily affected populations, will create additional problems. Schönteich speculates that because young people, primarily young men, are most likely to commit crime, a disproportionate number of young men between the age of 15 and 24 in severely affected countries may lead to higher levels of crime – particularly violent crime and group-based aggression.⁸ Others have argued that by straining social institutions like the labour market and educational system, 'youth bulges' resulting from either HIV/AIDS or fertility trends may make countries generally more unstable and prone to violence.⁹

These arguments suggest that HIV/AIDS will reduce security and stability in two main ways. First, that children set apart and damaged by AIDS-related orphanhood will be disproportionately more likely to engage in criminal and violent behaviour than other children. Second, that the epidemic will increasingly create an environment conducive to crime and insecurity. It is the latter that most accurately frames the issues under discussion.

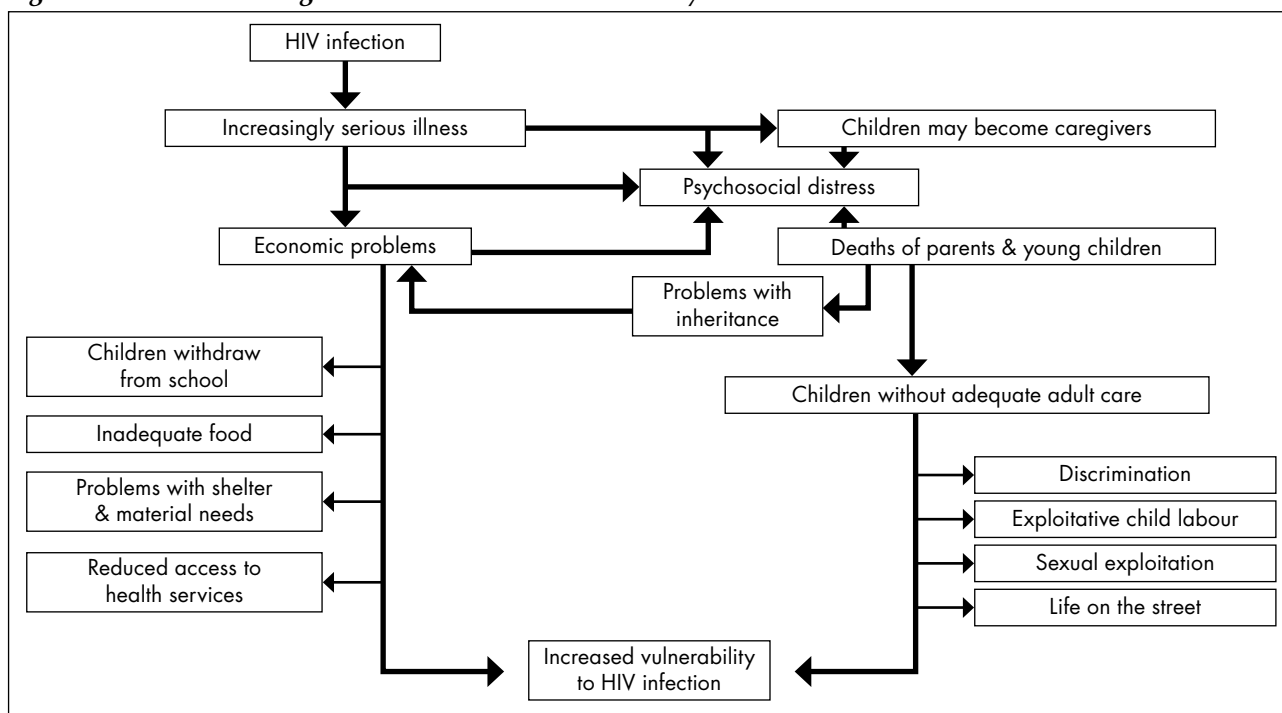
AIDS orphaning in context

On its current trajectory the epidemic stands to leave millions of children orphaned. Many of these children will first feel the effects of a parent's illness long before their death when they shoulder new responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings, taking on additional domestic chores, and generating income for the family.¹⁰ It is likely that many will be left in situations of intense hardship. Common consequences of orphaning including growing poverty and its correlates, the loss of parental affection, reduced levels of care, stigma, and the psychosocial

The epidemic may create an environment conducive to crime and instability



Figure 1: Problems among children and families affected by HIV/AIDS



Source: J Williams, Presentation to the US Council on Foreign Affairs, April 2005

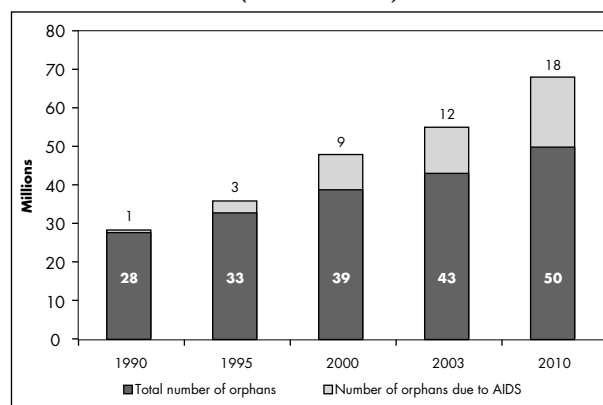
implications of repeated personal and material losses such as trauma, stress, depression, and a loss of social connectivity (Figure 1). Such loss and growing vulnerability are obviously undesirable, but it is questionable whether, in the African context, they make children orphaned by AIDS a ‘special case’ among large numbers of other vulnerable children.

It is clear that although the HIV/AIDS epidemic heralds orphaning on a vast scale (see Figure 2), war and poverty have already created large numbers of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. The numbers vary according to how orphans are defined. Some estimates use data for children under the age of 15, while others expand their definitions to include young people under the age of 18, with the literature variously reporting on ‘maternal orphans’ whose mothers have died, ‘paternal orphans’ whose fathers have died and ‘double orphans’.¹¹ Using an expansive definition of orphanhood (children under the age of 18 who have lost one or both of their parents), the latest estimates by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) suggest that there may be as many as 43 million orphans living in sub-Saharan Africa, of whom only about 12 million are thought to have lost parents to AIDS.¹²

Numerous studies also show that children in southern Africa have frequently ‘lost’ parents through the physical and social movements associated with migrant labour and fluid marital and partnership arrangements.¹³ Even where parents are alive, fostering, or the care of non-biological children whose parents

live elsewhere, is common. Analysing data from the South African Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development survey (SALSS) conducted in 1993, for example, Kaufman and her colleagues found that roughly 17% of African children between the age of six and 19 were living apart from their biological parents, while 12% of Coloured and just under 5% of Indian and white children were similarly fostered. They also found that close to 30% of all African children and just over 20% of Coloured children were sharing their home with fostered children.¹⁴ Available national estimates from elsewhere in Africa suggest similarly high levels of fostering, with as many as one in five children living apart from their parents in Namibia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cote d’Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Zambia, Ghana, and Malawi (Table 1, page 4).

Figure 2: The estimated number of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa (1990 – 2010)



Source: Children on the Brink (2004)



Table 1: Percentage of children (5-14) fostered in the developing world

Percent of children 5-14 fostered DHS, 1990-96			
Africa	%	Near East	%
Namibia	35.5	Morocco	5.9
Uganda	24.3	Turkey	1.5
Zimbabwe	22.0		
Cote d'Ivoire	21.6	Asia	
Cent. Af. Rep.	21.5	Phillipines	7.5
Zambia	21.2	Indonesia	6.6
Ghana	20.1	Kazakhstan	3.2
Malawi	19.5	Pakistan	2.2
Tanzania	19.4		
Cameroon	18.6	Latin America	
Senegal	17.8	Haiti	23.7
Niger	17.1	Dominican Rep.	19.1
Nigeria	15.5	Paraguay	10.6
Burkina Faso	14.8	Colombia	10.3
Kenya	13.9	Brazil	8.8
		Guatemala	7.3

Source: M Ayad et al, cited in S Hunter (2000)

More broadly, the implications of AIDS-related illness and death are seldom confined to households who loose members to the epidemic. Foster argues that children not immediately touched by the virus may feel the effects of HIV/AIDS when families provide money to support sick relatives, their mothers leave home to provide care for relatives affected by the virus, or their standard of living deteriorates as their family takes in children orphaned by AIDS.¹⁵ As the epidemic takes hold, they may also be affected as government services and structures tasked with providing for vulnerable children become overstretched,¹⁶ or economies affected by the epidemic provide fewer jobs. In some cases, high levels of illness and death may have an insidious psychosocial impact. Killian, for example, notes that South African children living in severely affected areas are excessively anxious about death and often reflect obsessively about illness and mortality.¹⁷

Such dynamics, together with the high levels of poverty that exist in many of the communities worst affected by the epidemic, mean that few of the above problems are confined to children who lose parents to AIDS. Writing on one of South Africa's townships, Ramphele notes that the loss and absence of parents, insecurity, and emotional trauma characterise the lives of many poor children in Africa:

Whereas the family is supposed to create a safe haven in life's troubled waters... uncertainty permeates family life in a manner that is difficult for outsiders to comprehend. The family unit can not be taken for granted and the availability of a mother, let alone both parents, is a luxury few children enjoy. In addition, the provision of basic needs is beyond many, and

trusting and respectful relationships are an exception rather than the rule. The family is under siege from the combined legacy of the migrant labour system, poverty, adherence to outmoded traditions, and the changing roles of men and women as gender politics are reconfigured everywhere...¹⁸

This is not to say that children immediately affected by HIV/AIDS do not frequently suffer enormous difficulties. They often experience deepening poverty and, owing to both the likelihood of repeated deaths and the stigma that surrounds the virus, may also experience considerable psychosocial stress. Some comparative studies on how children orphaned by AIDS fare compared to non-orphans in a range of African settings show that orphans suffer higher levels of malnutrition than non-orphans¹⁹ and are less likely to attend school.²⁰ In addition, participatory research shows that children often face discrimination within their families, communities, churches, and schools both before and after the death of their caregiver.²¹ There is also anecdotal evidence that orphans may experience high levels of economic and sexual abuse, although there are no studies examining the prevalence of abuse compared to other children.²²

Several studies also show that these effects vary according to factors such as age and gender, whether children are maternal, paternal or double orphans, whether they are taken in by the extended family, and which relatives then provide care. Studies also show that children orphaned by AIDS are often no more disadvantaged than poor children in comparable circumstances. This suggests both that the implications of orphanhood vary according to context, and that the boundaries between children orphaned by AIDS and other orphans and vulnerable children are frequently blurred.

There are only a handful of studies on the implications of AIDS-related illness and death for the psychological, emotional, and social adjustment of children and, as noted by Wild, our knowledge is based on "an intermingling of sound data, less reliable data and clinical data and is therefore somewhat less secure than it might appear at a first glance".²³ Research in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa found that youngsters whose parents had AIDS were often extremely anxious about their parent's illness to the point that they had difficulty concentrating at school.²⁴ Five other African studies, which compared orphans to non-orphans from the same community, suggest that orphans often experience more anxiety and depression than other children, but are no more prone to delinquency.²⁵

According to a Zambian study, orphans tend to "exhibit internalised behaviour changes like depression, anxiety and low self-esteem rather than acting out and sociopathic behaviour such as stealing, truancy,



aggression and running away".²⁶ A South African study similarly found that although many orphans exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as emotional detachment, problems in forming close relationships, and poor concentration, they were no more likely to experience problems interacting with their peers than non-orphans living in comparable circumstances. They were, however, more prone to somatisation, and were more likely to report stomach-aches, headaches, and sickness than non-orphans.²⁷

The available evidence therefore suggests that although children orphaned by AIDS undeniably suffer negative physical, social, and emotional outcomes as a result of their parent's death, there is little about these children that should make them disproportionately more likely to turn to crime and violence than other poor children in their communities. This overlap in experience between children orphaned by AIDS and other children necessitates a shift in perspective. Rather than a narrow focus on whether children orphaned by the epidemic pose a peculiar threat to stability and security, we should look at how HIV/AIDS may create an environment in which the deepening poverty and vulnerability of a larger group of children, together with demographic change, encourage greater levels of criminality and social and political volatility.

With this shift in mind, the remainder of this paper examines how the conditions created by the epidemic may impact on crime and instability. There is an overlapping area between instability and crime. For the purposes of argument, the paper maintains an arguably artificial distinction between the two.

Linking HIV/AIDS and crime

Criminologists acknowledge that pinpointing the 'causes' of crime is an often slippery and difficult undertaking. However, much of the available literature suggests that there are likely to be strong correlations between the dynamics triggered by the epidemic and growing levels of crime.

Factors like material need, social exclusion, unemployment, poor education, and family breakdown, for instance, lie at the heart of many of the prevailing theories of why individuals commit crime. High levels of inequality are also closely associated with victimisation – and may in fact be more consistently correlated with crime than poverty.²⁸ Researchers working in South Africa have found that "inequality is highly correlated with both burglary and vehicle theft",²⁹ while research in the United States suggests that economic disparities may foster frustration and anger that contributes to violent crime.³⁰ This

relationship between inequality and crime has been explained using the concept of relative deprivation, with Fajnzylber and his colleagues arguing, on the basis of work in Latin America, that such a sense of deprivation "breeds social tensions as the less well-off feel dispossessed when compared to wealthier people", so that "the poor seek compensation and satisfaction by all means, including committing crimes against both poor and rich".³¹ Less directly, factors such as urbanisation and its correlates – which could be exacerbated by the growing economic hardship associated with the epidemic – have also been linked to higher levels of criminality the world over.

At the micro level, there are a number of relevant personal, family, and environmental variables that may be associated with a greater likelihood of criminal behaviour. As noted by Schönteich, biographical factors such as age and gender are closely correlated with criminality, with official arrest and victimisation figures from around the world showing that most crime is committed by young men.³² The relationship between crime and age is particularly strong. As Smith notes, "probably the most important single fact about crime is that it is committed mainly by teenagers and young adults".³³ American data for the years 1980, 1994 and 2000, for example, shows that arrest rates for both violent and property crime increased dramatically amongst adolescents in their early teens, peaked around the age of 18 and then decreased continually after the age of 20.³⁴

This link between age, gender, and criminality is explained in terms of the particular developmental stages that correspond with adolescence, and the social meanings and roles associated with such physiological transition.³⁵ There are also a range of purely social variables associated with a greater propensity towards criminal behaviour (see Table 2, page 6). Those most relevant to the discussion at hand include:

- family variables, such as growing up in a single parent family, poor levels of supervision, having family members who are involved in criminal behaviour and exposure to strife, violence, and abuse; and
- schooling variables, including a lack of formal schooling, failing or dropping out of school, as well as exposure to overcrowded and unsupportive school environments.³⁶

A study of 97 Tanzanian adolescents by UN Habitat, for example, shows that while each youth in conflict with the law has a unique story to tell, many had a history of poor academic performance, physical, emotional

There is little about children orphaned by AIDS that should make them more prone to crime and violence



Table 2: Risk factors for criminal behaviour

Broad area	Specific risk factors
Individual	An economically stressed family, violence and physical abuse, sexual abuse, poor parental monitoring and support, loveless parents, lack of supervision, parents using alcohol and/or drugs, and a negative relationships with parents
Family or home factors	Feeling that life is oppressive, lacking hope for the future, feeling alienated, difficult personality, brain disease disorder, early aggressive behaviour, and different form of criminal activities
School factors	Lack of education, poor academic performance, failing, truancy, problems at school, and poor schooling
Community factors	Poverty, neighbourhood with a high crime rate, and unemployment
Extra-family relationships	Associations with deviant peers and gangs

Source A Maree (2003)

or sexual abuse, and poor parental monitoring and support.³⁷ A study of 61 sentenced juvenile offenders by the Centre for Violence and Reconciliation (CSV) in South Africa showed similar results, finding that most of the youngsters came from economically deprived families and frequently had conflictual relationships with people at home.³⁸

Assessing the impact of HIV/AIDS on crime rates

Given these correlates, it is likely that the demographic change, growing levels of poverty and inequality, and compromised service delivery resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic will be associated with higher levels of crime. To date, however, there is scant evidence to support these conclusions.

Most countries in southern Africa are in their third decade of the epidemic and most of these countries' epidemics have matured to the point that large numbers of people are already dying.³⁹ Life expectancy is declining, with the US Census Bureau estimating that average life expectancy may have already halved in Botswana and Zimbabwe from an expected 70 years to 39 and 38 years respectively.⁴⁰ The population structure of some of the worst affected countries has already deviated from the expected pattern and, although expected to worsen in the future, countries like Botswana may be seeing a hollowing out of their population structure as a result of rising death rates among adults in their thirties, forties, and fifties (Figure 3).

Available estimates also suggest that orphan numbers are on the increase. In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) alone, UNAIDS, UNICEF, and USAID estimate that approximately seven million children have lost either one or both of their parents to AIDS since 1990, and as many as two million have lost a parent to the epidemic since the turn of the millennium. The estimated number of children living without parents as a result of AIDS in 2003 varies by definition, but using the broadest definition, ranges from 120,000 in Namibia to 4.2 million in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Looking only at children who have lost both parents to AIDS, the numbers range from 19,000 in Namibia to 420,000 in Zimbabwe.⁴¹ Either way, we are talking about large numbers of children already orphaned by epidemic.

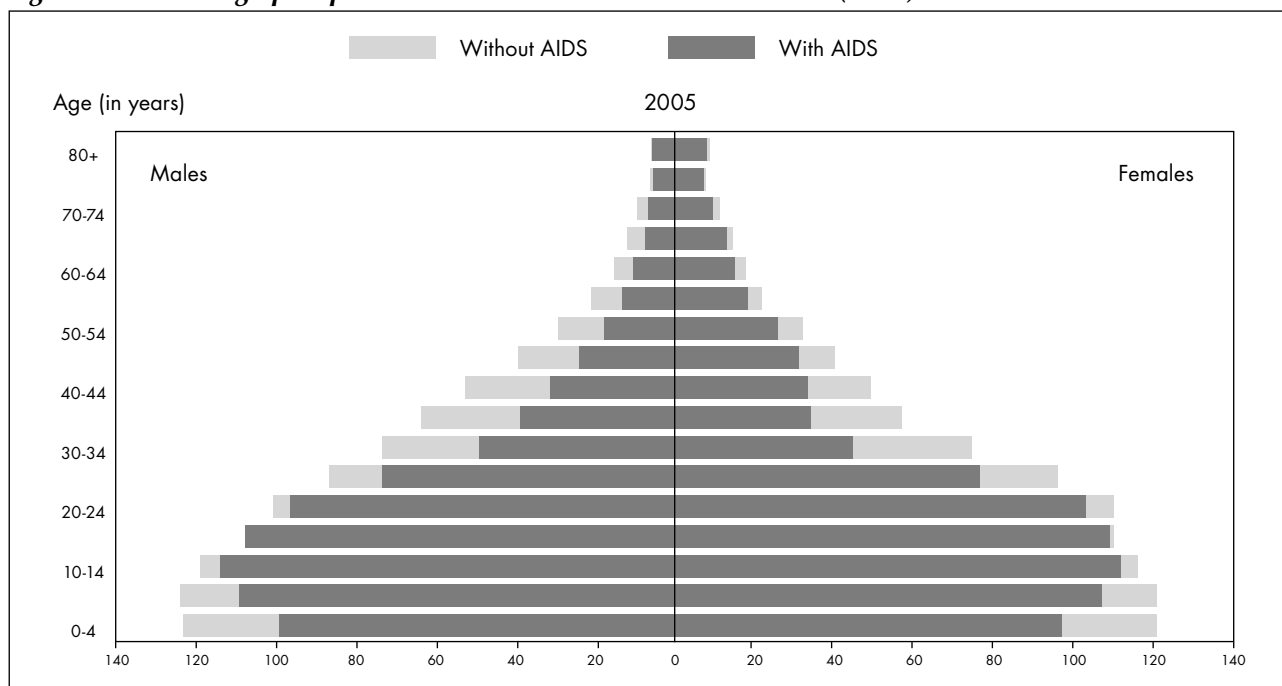
Despite such dynamics, it is difficult to pinpoint a significant impact on crime – although a paucity of reliable data makes such seemingly simple comparisons more difficult than one might expect.⁴² The results from the International Crime and Victimization Surveys (ICVS) conducted by United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) suggest that despite the makings of an 'orphan crime wave', countries like Botswana do not show comparably higher levels of victimisation than other African countries for which data are available. The results indicate a total victimisation rate of 32% of the population in Gaborone, compared to rates of 41% and 38% for Maputo and Johannesburg respectively.⁴³ Other sources, such as the UNODC Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (which collects official police data from UN members states) place Botswana's victimisation rate second to South Africa and comparable to Swaziland (5,207 per 100,000 compared to 7,997 and 4,803 per 100,000) – although such findings may be more reflective of better reporting and recording of crime in South Africa and Botswana than actual levels of victimisation.⁴⁴ Statistics on homicide, which are often considered to be the most accurate measure of crime due to higher recording rates (and a body that must be accounted for), suggest that Botswana has less of a crime problem than many of its neighbours. The latest Interpol statistics give it a murder rate of 13 per 100,000, on a par with Swaziland and behind South Africa (43) and Lesotho (51).

These statistics have limitations. The ICVS has been conducted in several African countries, but surveys have often been conducted in different years and have been confined to a single major city in each country.⁴⁵ The available police statistics are hampered by the universal tendency of such statistics to undercount levels of crime.⁴⁶ Despite such caveats, however, they suggest that while there is likely to be an association between the HIV/AIDS epidemic and crime, this relationship is not a simple, linear one. There would seem to be a number of reasons for this.

The first is that crime is a complex phenomenon that does not lend itself to the "tyranny of the single cause".⁴⁷ For instance, although poverty is often a motivating factor, it is not true that the poorest societies



Figure 3: The demographic profile of Botswana with and without AIDS (2005)



Source: B Epstein, *The demographic impact of AIDS*, US Census Bureau (no date)

have the highest rates of crime or that the poorest people necessarily commit the most crime.⁴⁸ Likewise, although inequality is more consistently correlated with crime than poverty, economic disparities are not always associated with crime. Many of the countries with the highest levels of inequality, such as Brazil and South Africa, do have high levels of victimisation, but several highly unequal societies, such as some Islamic states, do not.⁴⁹ Conflict theorists like James Davies attribute the messiness of such effects to the relativity of deprivation. He suggests that although the prevalence, duration, and degree of deprivation can help to predict the chance of conflict, the likelihood of violence is more closely linked to thwarted expectations than prolonged general poverty.⁵⁰ 'Relative deprivation' may therefore be gauged in relation to one's own past affluence.⁵¹

The second is that, even where young people are exposed to particular risks, they will not necessarily turn to crime. Criminologists recognise that, even where levels of offending are high, the decision to engage in crime remains an individual choice⁵² and exposure to micro-level risk factors does not necessarily condemn a child to problems in later life.⁵³ Like criminology, the burgeoning literature on risk and resilience is far from clear-cut, but work by Garbarino and others in the United States shows that the impact of risk factors is highly dependent on children's environment, and it is only when three or more risk factors combine with an overwhelming and unsupportive environment that children are likely to become delinquent or violent.⁵⁴

The broader literature on resilience supports Garbarino's work. The implications of exposure to deprivation and

other sources of risk are mediated to a large degree by factors such as personality and temperament, coping style, age of exposure, and the availability of caring adults and social supports in children's environment. The likelihood of long-term maladjustment is therefore dependent on the availability of conditions for recovery as much, or more than, the form, number or severity of precipitating stresses.

Children are more likely to experience problems when risks are cumulative or endure over time, or when they are given few opportunities for support and hope, but relationships with caring others and access to supportive networks and social institutions can present remarkable opportunities for recovery.⁵⁵ Research suggests that even low levels of support in childhood appear to enable children to overcome severe disadvantages,⁵⁶ and that children tend to seek out bonding experiences with adults and engage their support.⁵⁷ It is estimated that less than one third of children raised in situations of poverty and deprivation are affected negatively by these experiences, with most managing to overcome their circumstances to become healthy, well-adjusted adults.⁵⁸ As Killian writes:

...we all know such individuals – the person whose father was an alcoholic and whose mother was frequently hospitalised with a psychiatric disorder, yet who is now a happy and dedicated family man; the person who rose from the most severe deprivation and poverty to become a competent, caring medical doctor; the child who was orphaned at a young age, grew up in children's homes, became a juvenile delinquent and then settled into stable employment and is now a respected member

of his community... Of course, we also know people whose lives have seemed to follow a very different pattern: individuals who seem to have had every advantage that life could offer – a loving family, supportive friends, a good education, enough money and so forth – yet seem unable to become well-adjusted and productive adults.⁵⁹

Third, crime is linked to both the opportunities for committing crime and the cost and likelihood of being caught. Even where poverty and vulnerability are high, the likelihood of individuals breaking the law is mediated by factors such as social norms concerning the acceptability of crime, the availability of firearms and other weapons, and the strength of a country's criminal justice institutions. Countries with weak gun or border controls and ineffective criminal justice systems, for example, are likely to experience higher levels of crime than those in which guns are harder to obtain and criminals stand a high chance of being caught and punished.⁶⁰

The heterogeneous nature of crime

Another factor complicating efforts to predict the effects of HIV/AIDS on crime is what Leggett refers to "the diversity of human behaviours that fall under the general heading of 'crime'".⁶¹ As he argues, human beings commit crime for a wide range of reasons and different types of crime have different motivations. He makes the distinction between:

- acquisitive ('redistributive') crime by the poor, such as stealing food;
- acquisitive ('alternative employment') crime by the poor to provide an income;
- acquisitive ('greed motivated') individual crime;
- acquisitive ('greed motivated') organised crime;
- violent acquisitive crime where weapons are used;
- power-related crime, such as political violence or witchcraft killings;
- domestic violence;
- public violence, such as hate or ethnically routed crimes;
- cyclical ('vindictive') community violence, such as retributive attacks;
- risk taking ('rites of passage') crime;
- socio-pathological violence, such as rape and child abuse;
- crime related to the mental illness of the offender; and
- social order crime, such as allowing a pet to defecate on a sidewalk.⁶²

These categories are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, but they serve to illustrate that different types

of crime have their roots in different places. Someone who steals food in order to survive or to earn a living, for instance, may be motivated by poverty, while public and cyclical violence may be linked to factors such as relative deprivation, historical rivalries or economic frustration. Others, such as greed-motivated or pathological crime, are more closely associated with individual variables that have nothing to do with either poverty or the inequitable distribution of wealth. The likelihood of violent acquisitive crime may also be, at least in part, linked to factors such as the availability of weapons and attitudes to violence.

If and how the epidemic impacts on crime will thus be bound up with how the effects of the epidemic play themselves out in particular settings, the prevailing macro-economic and social environment, as well as structural factors such as the availability and acceptability of firearms or other weaponry. Future scenarios are difficult to predict and could unfold in a multitude of ways. It may be, for example, that crime is most severe in urban areas where economic stress and disparities are felt more keenly and city living loosens traditional social ties. In poor rural communities, where economic disparities are less marked and prevailing norms reject interpersonal violence, the effects of the epidemic may be more limited or confined to petty and non-violent property crime. Alternatively, the stresses associated with the epidemic may result primarily in higher levels of domestic violence or, as some argue, increased levels of rape and sexual assault rather than other forms more publicly oriented violence. This would be an indisputably undesirable outcome, but one that is unlikely to threaten society in the way envisaged in much of the literature.

The epidemic's impact on crime will depend on how its effects play themselves out in particular settings, the prevailing macro-economic and social environment and structural factors

Instability and its causes

The primary threat envisaged by the 'lawless hordes' theorists is not, however, the prospect of having more wallets being snatched, more husbands beating their wives, or a higher incidences of burglary. Rather, it is the spectre of political instability, conflict, and anarchy brought about by unprecedented numbers of impoverished, marginalised children and youth. There are two threads to these arguments. The first is that exceptionally high numbers of young people in a population will create a generally more conflict-prone environment. The second, as argued by Cheek, is that these children will create a recruitment pool for groups wanting to challenge governments and/or the existing social or political order. The proceeding sections examine the validity of these positions. For the purpose of argument, 'instability' is narrowly defined as an effective threat to the stability and integrity of state order resulting from violent political movements.



As already mentioned, there is an overlapping area between instability and crime, particularly organised, ethnically-motivated and power-related crime. With a focus on youth recruitment and perspectives on violence, the distinction between the two, however artificially, is maintained.

There are many reasons why groups may seek to violently overthrow or destabilise a government. Determining the relative importance of particular factors in different settings remains a source of intense debate. Among the most commonly cited causes of instability are competition for environmental and economic resources and markets, political ideology, ethnic and historical rivalries, and a desire for self-determination, dominance, equality, and revenge.⁶³ As discussed earlier, some theorists also argue that demographics, specifically the existence of disproportionately high numbers of youth, may be associated with the greater likelihood of instability.⁶⁴ Many of these factors, in turn, have their roots in high levels of poverty, political, economic and social inequities, unemployment, economic stagnation, weak government and poor service delivery by the public sector, and environmental degradation.⁶⁵

Looking only at the demographic picture, analysts like Cincotta and colleagues argue that, together with rapid population growth, youth bulges are strongly associated with the likelihood of civil war. Using data generated by the Conflict Data Project at the University of Uppsala, they have found that countries in which young adults comprised more than 40% of the adult population were more than twice as likely as countries with lower proportions of youth to experience an outbreak of civil conflict during the 1990s.⁶⁶ Urdal has similarly found strong quantitative evidence to suggest that youth bulges increase the risk of conflict, although he found no support for the idea that youth numbers above a critical level make countries more prone to conflict.⁶⁷ Other studies by the World Bank have found only a nominal association between large youth cohorts and conflict, but Urdal attributes these to weaknesses in the measures used. An empirical study by Mesquida and Wiener also demonstrates that 'coalitional aggression' – violence perpetrated by groups rather than individuals – is a function of changes in the proportion of young men within a society (those aged 15 to 29 in relation to those 30 years of age and older). They conclude that "the relative abundance of young men is associated with occurrence of coalitional aggression and the severity of conflicts as measured by reported casualties."⁶⁸

There may be an association between youth bulges and likelihood of civil war, but there is no proven causality.

There is an association between youth bulges and civil conflict but no proven causality

Children and youth have become stakeholders, whether active or not, in the political, economic, and social development of African countries. Demographically, HIV/AIDS has and will play a role in the growth of their age cohort and, consequently, their power in sheer numbers. Nevertheless, while demographic change and the range of other factors described above are strongly correlated with instability, the evidence suggests that it is the combination and recombination of these characteristics that creates the conditions for civil strife rather than their existence *per se*.

Political instability requires more than just large numbers of youth in a population and, as analysts like Cincotta and Urdal fully admit, demographic processes "do not act alone in producing stresses that can challenge government leadership and the functional capacity of states".⁶⁹ As noted by Argenti:

Youth are often cynically mobilised by political leaderships in pursuit of taking and retaining power. But what the overriding majority of the analyses available to us suggest is that young people do not turn to crime or violence *ex nihilo* by some obscure magnetism, but in response to particular historical, economic, and political conditions... Violence is not an end in itself for young people any more than it is for anybody else, but a means to an end learned by young people from their elders and used by them when denied all other means.⁷⁰

Growing levels of AIDS-induced poverty and inequality and poorer macro-economic performance may contribute to generally higher levels of political and social volatility. Ultimately, however, each conflict has a different instability equation or set of equations. While some factors are consistent between regions and across cultures, the active timelines and motivations that drive violence and instability make it dangerous to draw generalised conclusions:

It must be understood that vulnerability is generated and cannot be decontextualised. No situation is universal, and each country presents a specific and unique set of factors. Not only are there a multitude of interacting factors, but also no situation is static – different variables oscillate over time, and there is furthermore a concatenation of variables.⁷¹

Why children join wars

Children and youth are increasingly a political force to be reckoned with in sub-Saharan Africa.



There are extraordinarily young fighters participating in wars. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers estimates that there were 300,000 child combatants active worldwide in 1998 (a number that is reported to have remained relatively consistent over the past seven years).⁷² Of these, up to 100,000 children, some as young as nine, were estimated to be involved in armed conflict in Africa in mid-2004.⁷³ The recent conclusion of Liberia's Disarmament and Demobilisation Programme showed that over 100,000 youngsters went through the disarmament process. Of the total number of combatants disarmed at official camps, 8,704 were boys and 2,517 were girls under the age of 18.⁷⁴ Even outside the context of civil war, children and youth are deployed by those who wish to gain or maintain political power. In Zimbabwe, for example, Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF youth wing has become a government supported and controlled militia and has been credited with some of the worst human right abuses of the country's embattled political landscape.⁷⁵

Children become protagonists in conflicts in many ways. Some children are coerced or forced into participating, while others choose to join. An increasing number of studies suggest that joining such groups is often a rational decision for children living in countries characterised by conflict.⁷⁶ Brett's work on adolescents volunteering to take up arms in a range of recent conflicts concludes that war itself, poverty, poor access to education and employment, and family are often factors in young people's decision to fight. Poor children with little access to schooling or job opportunities may view soldiering as a viable work option, or be lured into service by the promise of an education. Others may join because relatives are enlisted or because of family expectations. She identifies other factors as well, including ideology, ethnicity, the struggle for liberation (or against oppression), and the desire to make and be with friends.⁷⁷

This said, not all youth and not all orphans are part of a pool of disgruntled potential fighters with nothing to lose, and more research is needed into why children resist becoming involved. As Barnett and Whiteside point out, "most orphans do not become child soldiers. Not all child soldiers are orphans."⁷⁸ Children and youth are not a homogenous group, and have important distinguishing features such as family and community ties and rural vs. urban contexts. Brett agrees that not all vulnerable young people will become fighters. As she notes, there are always more children living in conditions of poverty and need who do not join wars than those who do. She writes:

Joining wars is often a rational decision for children living in countries characterised by conflict

The impoverished child in a war zone, without access to school or employment and whose family has been destroyed or torn apart, is most at risk. But even in such a situation not all children will join up. There are always more specific features of the individual child's situation (for instance being orphaned with younger siblings to care for) and character (some will flee to another area or even another country to avoid being drawn into fighting), and/or specific trigger events (such as the killing of a family member, the enlistment of a close friend, a chance encounter at a crucial moment), which lead to an actual decision to join.⁷⁹

This finding is corroborated by Yusuf Bangura's examination of youth in the Sierra Leone war:

It is important to stress the point that the vast majority of Sierra Leone's youth are not war-prone. Most young people are linked to wider social structures that bind them to broadly shared community values and family-based systems of accountability. These social values and systems may have experienced considerable strain as a result of economic crisis, state contraction and war, but they have played a significant role in denying the RUF the bulk of the support it would have enjoyed from this group.⁸⁰

The instability equation in context: South Africa and Sierra Leone

In South Africa, youth played a leading role in the struggle against apartheid, battling economic and material deprivation, political and social exclusion, and oppression. Following the first democratic elections in 1994, there was both concern and fear among government officials and policy makers that the youth who had been involved in armed and violent struggle activities would become a threat to the stability of the state; that "the liberators of yesterday have become today's rejects or social outcasts."⁸¹ Yet, while poverty, inequality and unemployment remain high (and may in fact have worsened for many South Africans) and fewer than expected have reaped the benefits of a new political dispensation, South Africa remains fairly politically stable.

There is a democratic mandate and there are no signs of an imminent political coup or rebellion, regardless of economic disparity.⁸² In a recent survey, 73% of respondents said that the country is "going in the right direction."⁸³ Similarly, a 2001 national survey of youth found that about eight out of ten South African youth report being "very happy" (61%) or "somewhat happy" (22%) about their lives at present, and very



few report being either “somewhat unhappy” (4%) or “very unhappy” (4%). When asked specifically about their future prospects, almost half (45%) agreed that they have “limitless” opportunities.⁸⁴ This may be in large part owing to the real or perceived political inclusion of today’s young South Africans under the ANC-led government.

The 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) provides a different perspective on youth violence. Although much of the militarization of youth happened in supposed service to a liberation struggle, the movement quickly became brutally violent and politically unfocused, driven by organised exploitation of valuable natural resources such as diamonds. Sierra Leone is often held up as an example of what can happen when disenfranchised children and youth are left vulnerable to manipulation, but there is certainly no allusion to an orphan crisis in the extensive literature examining the causes of conflict.

When young rebels embarked on a campaign of amputation that horrified the world there were multiple factors at work. One was the youth demographic. Equally as important was an environment that made large-scale co-optation of youth into armed groups possible. The components of this conducive environment included a combination of politics (a patrimonial system in which many adolescents felt stifled and excluded); poverty, with Sierra Leone consistently ranked 177th, dead last in the UNDP Human Development Index;⁸⁵ and displacement, with war specifically targeting institutions of safety for young people such as schools and families.⁸⁶ Rebel leaders methodically broke down new recruits’ resistance to violence by forcing them to murder parents and family members, rape other young people, and burn their own villages.⁸⁷

The broader picture in the Mano River Basin reveals a widely acknowledged problem of “roving warriors” like the Sierra Leone rebels.⁸⁸ This broader picture, too, can be broken down into a unique combination of factors behind the extended conflict. The sub-regional political climate is one where leaders do not respect territorial boundaries and regularly fund incursions into neighbours’ territory (yet cannot find funds for primary education or literacy programmes).⁸⁹

The random brutality of these particular armed groups is, therefore, specific to the political, economic, and social history of the sub-region and would be difficult to replicate in a different context. Now that the war in Sierra Leone has ended and a formal disarmament process and Truth and Reconciliation Commission completed, the language surrounding youth

participation and threats to stability sounds similar to the discourse in South Africa in the mid-1990s. The TRC Report recommends, specifically, that:

The denial of a meaningful political voice to youth had devastating consequences for Sierra Leone. More avenues for youth to express themselves and to realise their potential need to be created. Political space should be opened up so that youth can become involved in governance and in the decision making process. Youths must have a stake in governance.⁹⁰

Drawing on the example of South Africa, the belief that the political inclusion of youth can prevent future violence is being used in the implementation of almost every donor and government agenda in Sierra Leone. Recent local elections ensured that by law, 10% of representatives are youth. The National Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), a national NGO, has mainstreamed youth empowerment programs into all of their regional activities. Youth are seen as a force to be appeased to make peace sustainable. An NMJD officer in Kenema put it this way:

Part of the reasons for the war was marginalisation of youth. Youth felt it better to join the war because they had no stake in what was happening with the [political] system. They can make or break the peace even based on whether they have leisure activities available like football or other sports. We have to keep them occupied so they do not become outcasts.⁹¹

The examples of Sierra Leone and South Africa suggest that, all other things being equal, including youth in political systems and instilling a sense of civic connection and empowerment may make the difference between stability and instability. This suggests that the number and vulnerability of young people as a result of the AIDS epidemic is likely to become significant only if successive cohorts are systematically and institutionally deprived of economic, political, and educational opportunities. It may not be vulnerability itself that is the key to determining the implications of the epidemic, but how society and government respond to this vulnerability.

Extrapolation and tipping points

The tipping model has been applied to epidemics of violence as well as AIDS (among many other things). It asserts that there are points of critical mass for certain types of behaviour (for example, neighbourhood or inner city migration) that produce significant collective changes out of many smaller, individual decisions or actions. The tipping model suggests that, as long as

Politically including youth and instilling a sense of civic connection can make the difference between stability and instability



attitudes or behaviours that undermine security occur infrequently, or are restrained by prevailing social norms or institutions like the criminal justice system, order is not threatened. As the tipping model implies, "if the expected attitudes or behaviour are perceived to be unrestrained or are repeated often, they may provoke a sudden collapse."⁹² This is the essence of the idea that a demographic tidal wave of orphans could push towards a tipping point where educational, health, criminal justice, and other institutions fail, leading to the possibility of social disorder.

However, even the tipping model features many possible outcomes of incremental change. Not every expectation, whether individual or collective, is self-confirming. Theorists like Gladwell and Schelling⁹³ identify situations in which events that are anticipated to be horrific or inevitable can be reversed, either when enough individuals alter their own behaviours or when negative prophecies lead to institutional changes that avert the feared outcome. One example of this is the peaceful transition to democracy in South Africa, which many did not expect. If, like Gladwell, one believes that "ideas and behaviour and messages and products sometimes behave just like outbreaks of infectious disease," then it becomes possible to see many different potential outcomes of the way one epidemic may influence another: HIV/AIDS, crime, and instability can be seen as separate systems that will interact according to sets of factors as diverse as individual choice and government spending.

Conclusion

There is very little empirical data available to test the links between the HIV/AIDS epidemic and crime and instability; a great deal more is needed before definitive conclusions about these links can be drawn. A broad reading of both the criminological and conflict literature suggests that the relationships involved are not simple, linear ones. There is evidence to suggest that demographic change, growing levels of poverty and inequality, and compromised service delivery may contribute to higher levels of crime, but is difficult to predict the magnitude of these effects. There is, however, little evidence to suggest that the epidemic will, in the absence of other tensions and vulnerabilities, result in political instability or conflict. In both cases, the literature suggests children have fairly conventional, even mundane aspirations for their lives. Whether orphaned or just poor, they are unlikely to turn either criminal or violent if they have viable opportunities for political, economic, and social inclusion. Given appropriate support, the epidemic is likely to remain a predominantly humanitarian crisis as opposed to a significant security threat.

Resisting the "tyranny of the single cause" does not preclude thoughtful analysis of how HIV/AIDS may impact on either crime or conflict; it simply

calls for a more nuanced view. Those who argue, without empirical evidence, that increasing numbers of orphans or youth will inevitably lead to catastrophic outcomes often fail to differentiate between types of crime and between crime and large-scale instability. They also ignore the prevailing social and economic context in which the epidemic is occurring and the power of individual resilience. The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that such subtleties are crucial.

If we see children only as helpless victims, we risk ignoring the need to provide more than just humanitarian aid. Growing numbers of poor children will require both material and psycho-social support, while youth majorities will demand complex political and economic inclusion and participation. If we see them only as potential perpetrators of violence, we risk not only depriving them of such support and involvement, but we also ignore the extraordinary potential for positive change that young people possess. Children orphaned by AIDS already face marginalisation. Labelling them as a security risk without properly understanding the nature of the links between the epidemic and crime and instability may exacerbate rather than ameliorate security concerns. We must strive to better understand the nature and parameters of their environments. Only then can we design and implement the vital programmes to support the most vulnerable.

Notes

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About this paper

HIV/AIDS is leaving millions of children orphaned and living in situations of acute vulnerability. The idea that growing numbers of children orphaned by AIDS could pose a serious threat to individual and communal security in some African countries has gained substantial currency over the last five years. Consequently, few discussions on the effects of HIV/AIDS now fail to mention the seemingly common-sense connection between rising numbers of impoverished orphans and increasing levels of crime and conflict.

This connection is generally presented as a neat, linear relationship. Is this the case? Do children orphaned by AIDS represent a unique threat to security and stability or do they pose a predominantly humanitarian problem? Are there factors that may make a difference in determining the ultimate impact of the epidemic for both parentless young people and society? This paper explores these questions in the context of sub-Saharan Africa.

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