

Policy Brief: Depression among caregivers of orphaned & vulnerable children

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There is growing evidence of the mental health consequences faced by children orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS. However, far fewer studies examine the mental health outcomes of adults caring for these children. We need a better understanding of the mental health outcomes of these caregivers. Depression is an especially important outcome to understand, given that HIV and depression are the leading causes of global burden of disease in low and middle income countries. This study examines the prevalence of depression among caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other vulnerable children and identifies risk and protective factors for depression.

The Questions:

- What is the prevalence of depression among adults caring for children in HIV-endemic communities?
- Are caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other vulnerable children at higher risk for depression?
- What are risk and protective factors for depression?

The Research:

- Cross-sectional survey of 1599 adult caregivers in KwaZulu Natal Province
- Sampling was based on a representative community sample
- The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale was used to assess depressive symptomology

Finding 1: High rates of depression among adults caring for children

- 30% of adults caring for children in a HIV-endemic community reported depression.

Finding 2: Orphan caregivers at highest risk for depression

- Orphan caregivers – both those caring for AIDS-orphaned and other-orphaned children – were more likely to be depressed (35%) compared to non-orphaned caregivers (18%).
- Caregivers of AIDS-orphaned and other-orphaned children were at equally high risk for depression.

Finding 3: Risk and protective factors for depression

- Risk factors
 - Caregivers were 3.5x more likely to be depressed if their household was food insecure.
 - Caregivers were 2 times more likely to report depression if were female
- Protective factors
 - Caregivers had a 55% lower odds of depression if their household had steady salaried income.

Conclusions:

- Adults caring for children in HIV-endemic communities are at high risk for depression, with approximately 1/3 of all adult caregivers reporting depression.
- Orphan caregivers face an even higher risk for depression compared to caregivers of non-orphaned children. This elevated risk is not changed by the whether they are caring for an AIDS-orphaned other other-orphaned child, suggesting that the responsibilities of caring for an orphaned child, rather than cause of orphanhood, elevates risk for caregiver depression.
- Families in HIV-affected communities need mental health support.
- Given the level of need, we urgently need to generate evidence on efficacious and effective community-based interventions that can prevent and reduce risk depression among caregivers in HIV-affected communities.
- Interventions may want to consider a family-based approach, given the important dynamics of caregiving as a risk factor for caregiver depression.

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