

The Issue of Father Absence and the Socio-Economic Challenges for Family Well-being in the South African Landscape

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Abstract

To address the issue of father absence and its impact on family well-being in South Africa, this study employs a theoretical review and descriptive methods. Additionally, it acknowledges the various consequences of father absence and the declining role of men in society. Father absence poses a significant social problem, particularly exacerbated in the post-colonial era by various factors such as socio-economic challenges, divorce, family breakdown, untold fatherhood, refused fatherhood, and lack of fatherhood accountability. This issue has resulted in poverty-stricken households, directly affecting children. The objective of this study is to enhance family well-being within the context of the nation. The literature review and methodology have yielded valuable insights into examining the phenomenon of father absence.

Key words: father absence, socio-economic challenges, family well-being, South Africa

J.E.L classification: D1, D12, D31, D91, E21, P46

1. Introduction

Father absence has garnered significant attention since 1968 owing to its profound impact on children's personal adjustment during the socialization process (Thomes 1968, p. 89). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the South African government has identified father absence as one of its primary socio-economic concerns (Kamau 2018, p. 14). According to Freeks (2022a, p. 1), the concept of 'father absence' was initially proposed in the 1990s by University of Chicago theologian Don Browning (cf. Meyer 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, it should be noted that being a husband and a father are two distinct roles. Fatherhood is characterized by the presence of a child in the family (Salami & Okeke 2018, p. 2).

2. Theoretical background

The literature review in this paper entails a meta-theoretical analysis of father absence and its socio-economic impacts on family well-being.

2.1. What is father absence in reality?

Reuven-Krispin *et al*, (2021, p. 453) define 'father absence' as a person's need and longing for a father who has not been present in their lives emotionally, physically, or psychologically. Firstly, it denotes physical absence due to various circumstances such as familial discord, divorce, employment obligations, social unrest, and conflicts. Thus, irrespective of physical proximity, the second interpretation addresses the father's emotional detachment from their child's life. Meyer (2018, p. 4) observes that the breakdown of parental relationships can partially be attributed to father absence. While Mabusela classifies these as *factors*, Meyer suggests that they are *reasons* for paternal absence. Father absence can stem from various factors, including fathering children outside of marriage, abandonment, divorce, emotional unavailability despite physical presence, employment demands, social dislocation (where the father resides separately from the family), and death (Mabusela 2014, p. 13).

Father absence also includes circumstances where fathers fail to dedicate sufficient time to their children and have minimal impact on their development (Makofane 2015, pp. 22, 24). Fathers who do not reside with their children, refrain from communication, and fail to provide financial support are categorized as absent fathers (Eddy, Thomson-de Boor & Mphaka 2013, p. 7). While the detrimental effects of father absence is widely acknowledged, it is essential to recognize that even fathers who are physically present in their families can have negative impacts on family well-being (Meyer 2018, p. 2).

The effects of father absence prevent children from feeling and showing love, which contributes to persistent behavioral problems (Freeks 2022b, p. 1). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that father absence is a societal factor that can exacerbate the challenges faced by many South African families. In the absence of a father figure, relationships are more prone to breakdowns, resulting in heightened dysfunctional family dynamics and diminished affection (Ellis *et al*, 2012).

2.2. The problem of father absence

This paper acknowledges that the effects of father absence have been a longstanding subject of research, extensively explored by numerous scholars and researchers (Freeks 2022a, p. 4). Nevertheless, considering the intricate social, historical, political, and economic landscape of South Africa, all of which have contributed to the widespread occurrence of father absence, addressing this issue remains a crucial area of study (Ramatsitse & Ross 2023, p. 199). Father absence is not confined to South Africa alone, as noted by Freeks (2022a, p. 2); rather, it is a significant societal challenge affecting numerous families and communities globally.

Additionally, the dearth of father figures has emerged as a pressing national concern in South Africa (Tau 2020, p. 4). This palpable and urgent issue is driving rapid socio-economic transformations across Africa, with South Africa experiencing particularly notable effects (Kesebonye & P'Olak 2020, p. 1). It is evident that the nation grapples with an exceptionally high rate of father absence (Khan 2018, p. 18), rendering the absence of fathers within families and society at large a profound social issue (Kamau 2018, p. 5). This troubling trend affects children from diverse communities, representing a significant social issue that impacts families of all racial backgrounds (Freeks 2022a, p. 2).

Furthermore, it is noted that a considerable number of families in South Africa are headed by single mothers, with the primary drivers of socio-economic challenges in single parenting attributed to the adverse social effects of fatherhood and father absence (Freeks 2020, p. 3). Accordingly, Kamau (2018, pp. 8-9) reported an increase in the number of female-headed families in South Africa and the ensuing effect on the emergence and maturation of masculine identities. Additionally, South Africa grapples with a high divorce rate, often resulting in single mothers assuming sole responsibility for raising their children without the involvement of fathers (Tau 2020, p. v). Despite this, women demonstrate resilience in their ability to independently support and provide for their families, even amidst the high divorce rate (Kamau 2018, p. 16).

Moreover, the absence of a parent detrimentally affects a family's capacity to operate cohesively, leading to a deficiency in the parental role (Freeks 2019, p. 685). Consequently, one of the foremost threats to family stability is the absence of a father (Freeks 2022a, p. 2). Navigating families and parenting can be inherently challenging, especially given the profound impact of a father's absence (Freeks 2022a, p. 5). According to Tau (2020, p. 1), the prevalence of families lacking a father figure is increasing, thereby subjecting many families to the hardships associated with paternal absence (Freeks 2020, p. 3). This absence significantly influences the development of one's identity and their relationships with other men as well (Kamau 2018, p. 5).

Yi and Nel (2020, p. 2) list unemployment, divorce, the HIV epidemic, and cultural factors as primary causes of father absence in their article. Among various other factors, poverty stands out as a significant contributor to and consequence of father absence, thereby exacerbating the devastating socio-economic challenges faced by families (Freeks 2022a, p. 1; Kamau 2018, p. 15).

In the context of the topic of this paper, it is evident that men, or fathers, are falling short in their responsibilities to their families and society at large, as father absence emerges as a serious and adverse social issue in the South African landscape.

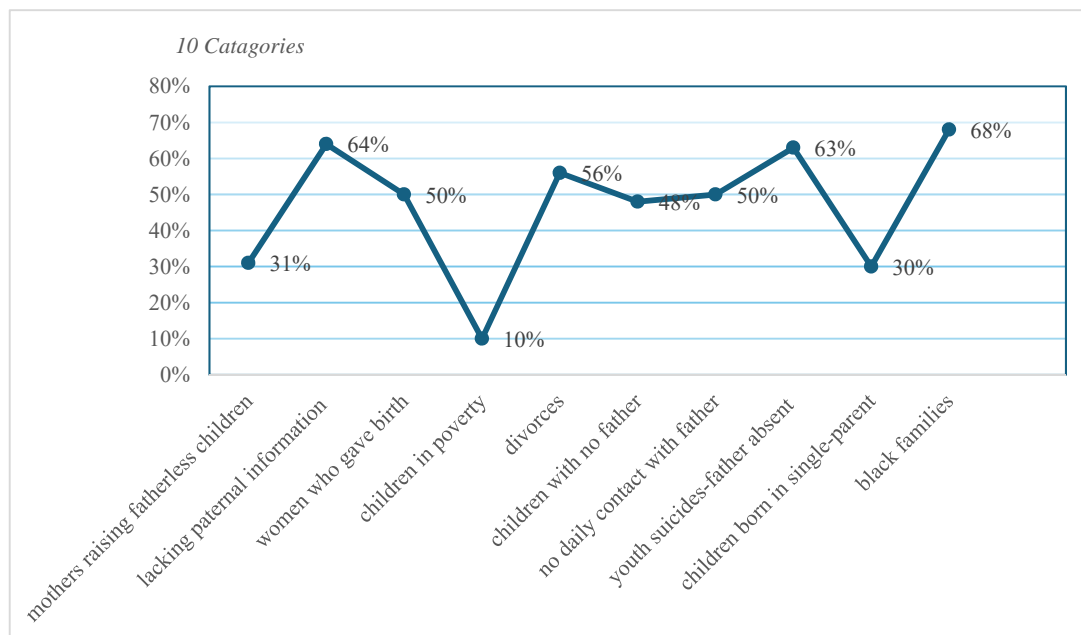
2.3. Socio-economic challenges and worrying statistics

The absence of a father is a profound concern and cry for help (Amoateng *et al*, 2004). With statistics indicating that 31% of mothers are single-handedly raising their children, this issue looms significantly and warrants serious attention. Moreover, out of the 1.1 million births registered in 2015, 64% lacked complete information about the biological father. Approximately 886,202 babies were born that year, with 50% of the mothers giving birth unaccompanied by the support of their biological fathers (Hawkins 2015). In South Africa, there are 5.3 million children under the age of five who are fatherless. Surprisingly, 93% of these children's parents are still alive. This group constitutes approximately 10% of the population, with many of them experiencing poverty and residing in unfavorable conditions due to the absence of their fathers (Mkhize 2013, p. 2).

According to data from the South African Institute of Race Relations in 2010, parents who had children experienced a divorce rate of 56%, leaving 48% of these children without fathers. Consequently, the overall number of orphans in South Africa reached 3.95 million, representing yet another troubling trend of growth (Frazier 2015). An even more profound tragedy stemming from divorce is the staggering statistic that 9 million children are left without fathers (Frazier 2015). Shockingly, 50% of fathers in South Africa lack regular contact with their children, a disheartening reality for the majority of these children (Richter, Chikovore & Makusha 2010, p. 361). Furthermore, an unsettling fact is that father-absent homes contribute to 63% of documented teenage suicides in South Africa (Frazier 2015).

One-third of the nation's prison population comprises young fathers aged 18 to 25, who have children living outside the prison walls (incarcerated men). Given that 30% of South African children are born into single-parent households, father absence emerges as a significant contributing factor to the country's prevailing social issues. This figure escalates to 68% within black communities, amplifying the concern even further (Feni 2016). As previously mentioned, current estimates suggest that around 2.13 million children are impacted by father absenteeism in South Africa, based on data from 2013 (5.3 million) and 2015 (9 million) (Dube 2016). These figures highlight the significant challenge of fatherhood facing the nation. Moreover, data released by Statistics South Africa further reveal that a considerable number of these children are raised by single mothers, while many others endure abandonment.

Figure no. 1. Worrying statistics



Source: Hawkins (2015); Mkhize (2013); Richter *et al* (2010); Frazier (2015); Feni (2016)

2.4. Children as the vulnerable group in a father-absent home

Though many children have grown up in homes where fathers have neglected their responsibilities, the fundamental quality of children is that they are blessed by God with parents and families (Freeks 2019, p. 686). As a result, teenagers without a father figure may find it difficult to understand the role of a father and may develop an incorrect view of God as the Father. Furthermore, it is harder for children to comprehend the love and tenderness of God the Father when their fathers are emotionally distant from them (Yi & Nel 2020, p. 1). Moreover, the absence of a father in a child's upbringing increases the likelihood of adverse life consequences, such as drug abuse, suicide, low academic achievement, criminal activity, mental health disorders, and a negative self-perception (Freeks 2022a, p. 2).

In the South African context, the issue arises where communities with children stand as the most vulnerable group to the impacts of father absence. Moreover, it has been identified that one of the most harmful social challenges confronting South African children is the absence of a father figure, resulting in the deprivation of a positive male role model (Freeks 2019, p. 686). Roughly 50% of South African children lack regular contact with their fathers, a factor contributing to the nation's disproportionately high rate of father absence (Patel & Mavungu 2016, p. 19). This absence heightens a child's vulnerability to violence, substance abuse, involvement in criminal activities, and participation in risky sexual behaviors (Salami & Okeke 2018, p. 2).

Furthermore, the absence of a father exacerbates the suffering of children who lack a meaningful relationship with their fathers and struggle to express and receive love (Salami & Okeke 2018, p. 2). Research indicates that South Africa is experiencing a rapid decline in fatherhood, leading to a growing trend of fatherlessness (Freeks 2022a, p. 1; Magqamfana & Bazana 2020, p. 169; Freeks 2017, p. 3; Feni 2016, p. 2).

Additionally, the absence of a father significantly increases children's vulnerability, including their heightened risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation (Freeks 2019, p. 685). Father absence has also been associated with children's poor academic performance, involvement in criminal behavior, and elevated high school dropout rates (Tau 2020, p. 1). Moreover, young girls who grow up without fathers often experience low self-esteem, difficulties in dating, mental health problems, poverty, engaging in risky sexual behavior, dropping out of school, early pregnancy, and other adverse outcomes (Brown 2018, p. 1).

Conversely, boys are more susceptible than girls to the negative effects of socio-economic hardship and the absence of a father. When their fathers are absent, boys are more likely to face academic challenges, such as school suspensions, while girls are more likely to experience teenage depression, especially in households with a stepfather (Lundberg 2017, p. 1). In fact, the impact of father absence on truancy and school suspension is significantly stronger for boys in Grades 3 – 8 compared to girls (Lundberg 2017, p. 4).

According to a study by Salami and Okeke (2018, p. 2), girls without father involvement are more likely to have low self-esteem, engage in risky sexual behavior, and struggle to form and maintain romantic relationships, while boys without father involvement are more likely to exhibit 'hypermasculine' traits such as emotional instability and aggression.

In conclusion, growing up in a father-absent home is almost certain to result in socio-economic challenges and trauma for children.

3. Research methodology

The methodology employed in this study functioned as a strategic framework or navigational guide to achieve the research goals. Vyhmeister (2008, p. 38) explains that the methodology serves as the mechanism through which the stated objective is achieved. It elucidates the author's plan to gather, analyze, and assess the data in order to address the research question or hypothesis. Therefore, the methodology adopted in this research paper is a descriptive literature review, aimed at exploring the issue of father absence, including its socio-economic impacts on family well-being. To identify specific trends, events, and scenarios, the author consulted various sources such as books, journal articles, academic papers, and literature reviews on the topic. The literature review encompassed academic works from both national and international publishing houses. Several databases were

accessed, including ATLAS, EBSCOhost, NEXUS, SCOPUS, ISI, and ISAP from North-West University (NWU) in South Africa. The research question was formulated as follows: What are the ruining ramifications of father absence and the socio-economic challenges for family well-being?

4. Findings

The findings derived from this literature review paper regarding the issue of father absence and the socio-economic challenges for family well-being are tabulated below:

Table no. 1

Finding	Description
Father absence is destructive	Father absence is a destructive social issue in the South African landscape, and families, especially children, are constantly at risk.
Strategy of supportiveness and availability	For the family to have healthy relationships, especially with the children, the father must adopt and put into practice a supportive, available, and physically involved approach or strategy.
Fathers as leaders	Fathers are the leaders of their family, and if they are not emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually available, there is a void, or vacuum, or gap within the family.
True meaning of man and father	Fathers need to comprehend how important it is to reclaim and rediscover the true meaning of what it means to be a man and a father in a world that is in desperate need of moral and engaged fathers.
Fathers can orchestrate change in the family	Because they establish the foundation for future relationships, fathers possess the capacity and determination to effect change within the family.
Family well-being	In order to demonstrate to society what family well-being really means, fathers in the South African landscape need to be present in the lives of their children.
Responsible and accountable fathers	Family well-being matters when fathers are responsible, accountable, present, and available in matters such as school, meetings, activities, sports, friends, etc.
Stronger and stable families	Stronger and more stable families are needed in our current society characterized by father absence.
The role and function of fathers	The role and function of fathers are fundamental for the well-being and socio-economic matters in the family.

Source: Author's own processing

5. Conclusions

The literature review unequivocally highlights father absence as a significant issue within the South African landscape, as well as globally. This paper focused on the detrimental effects of father absence on families and communities, showing how child abuse and other socio-economic challenges

are exacerbated by the absence of fathers. Consequently, children left without paternal care and guidance may be at risk and in need of protection. The absence of fathers can impede children's development on the emotional, spiritual, and physical levels. Growing up without a father figure is not in the best interests of children, particularly as boys often rely on their fathers to set and enforce rules. Fathers also provide both boys and girls with a sense of emotional and physical security. Moreover, a caring father plays a pivotal role in fostering his children's inner strength and overall development. To address the growing social issue of father absence in South African families, efforts should focus on training, equipping, and empowering men.

6. References

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