

## Preparation and support for caregivers may reduce adolescents' risk of caregiver-perpetrated physical aggression in South Africa

Many children in South Africa live outside of parental care, due to orphanhood, parental labour migration, unemployment, and for other reasons. Family members and other adults thus play an important role in providing substitute care. Non-parental caregivers have been found to experience high levels of psychological distress and burden, potentially leading to poor outcomes for children. The present analysis examines whether these and other potential risk factors are associated with caregiver-perpetrated physical aggression towards adolescent girls living outside of parental care in the Free State province.

### Study design

- Secondary analysis was performed using baseline survey data collected previously for an evaluation of a bereavement support group intervention for adolescent girls.
- Adolescent participants, aged 13-17, were enrolled in the 9th grade at one of 11 peri-urban schools where the program was offered, had experienced the loss of someone close to them, and expressed interest in participating in the intervention.
- Data regarding experiences of caregiver-perpetrated physical aggression were included from a subgroup of 190 adolescents living outside of parental care. Data from their primary caregivers regarding custody planning, care arrangements, and perceptions of burden were also utilized in the analysis.

### Findings

- One in ten adolescents reported that their caregiver had hit them with a hand or object in the month preceding the survey.
- Increasing levels of caregiver burden (reflecting the physical, emotional, and financial hardships related to providing care) were associated with greater odds of physical aggression.
- However, more than half of the caregivers had discussed the adolescent's care with their biological parent(s) beforehand, and this preparation greatly reduced the odds of physical aggression.
- Other caregiver factors, such as depression and kinship, were not associated with the likelihood of physical aggression.

### Policy and program recommendations

- These findings suggest that interventions tailored around custody planning and caregiver support for families at high risk of parental loss or absence may mitigate caregiver-perpetrated physical aggression.
- Interventions should include assistance designed to prepare substitute caregivers to assume their new role, in order to minimize associated burden.
- Assessment tools, such as the Zarit Burden Interview used in this study, may be a useful method for programme staff to identify caregivers in need of support.

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