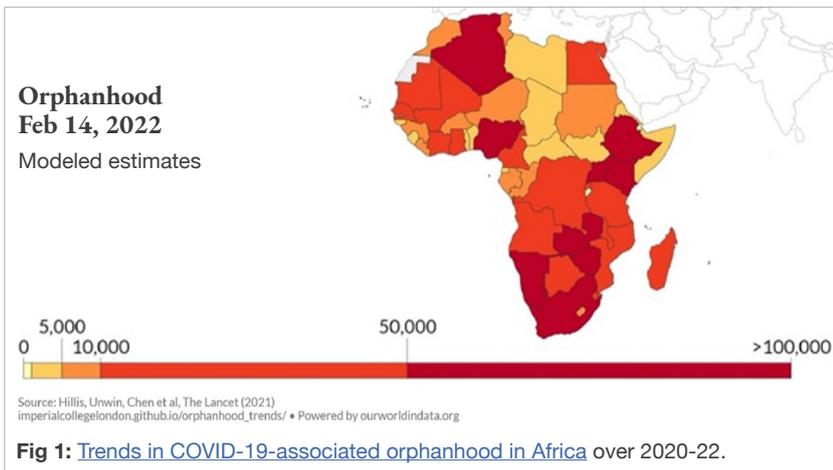




# COVID-19-Associated Orphanhood in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

## An urgent call to integrate care for orphaned children into every national COVID response



**Fig 1:** Trends in COVID-19-associated orphanhood in Africa over 2020-22.

### Global, Regional, and South African Minimum Estimates.

New evidence shows alarming patterns of childhood vulnerability, especially among families exposed to COVID-19 associated death<sup>2</sup>. **Globally, it is estimated that more than 10 million children have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19<sup>3</sup>.** In the Africa Region, a minimum of 2.5 million children lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19 in just two years (Figure 1). **South Africa has over 200,000 children bereaved by the death of a parent or caregiver due to COVID-19.**

### Losing A Parent or Caregiver.

COVID-19-associated orphanhood is now catastrophic – **globally, approximately one child was orphaned every six seconds in 2021.** Research shows that children who have lost a caregiver have higher risks of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, sexual exploitation, which may lead to HIV infections, mental health problems, economic strain, and food insecurity<sup>4</sup>. These children need support immediately, to prevent these tragic consequences.

The number of children affected by the orphanhood crisis in South Africa nearly doubled over 8 months from March 2021 through October of 2021, compared to the first 12 months of the pandemic. As we have learned from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, if care and protection of orphaned children is not included in national pandemic responses, an entire generation of children will be affected.

### Increasing Childhood Vulnerability in COVID-19.

Both HIV and COVID-19 cause highest mortality amongst South African populations that have been marginalized. Head of household death can increase family poverty, violence, and transactional sexual exploitation for adolescent girls. Grandparents also have a major role in caregiving and financial support. With high COVID-19 mortality rates in older people, the crisis is exacerbated.

It is essential that children at risk of separation from their families across the region are not placed in institutions – which are detrimental to their health, wellbeing, development, and safety. South Africa has led the way in promoting family-based care for AIDS-orphaned children: It is critical now to guarantee investments in safe and nurturing family-based care for those who have lost their caregivers to COVID-19.

With almost **100,000 COVID-19-associated deaths** in South Africa, Imperial College London's [Orphanhood Tracker](#) further reports at a minimum in South Africa:

**144,500**  
children have lost one or both parent(s) to COVID-19.

**165,100**  
children have lost their primary caregiver, including a parent or custodial grandparent to COVID-19.

**207,300**  
children have lost their primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-19.

**For every adult death, two South African children lose a caregiver.**

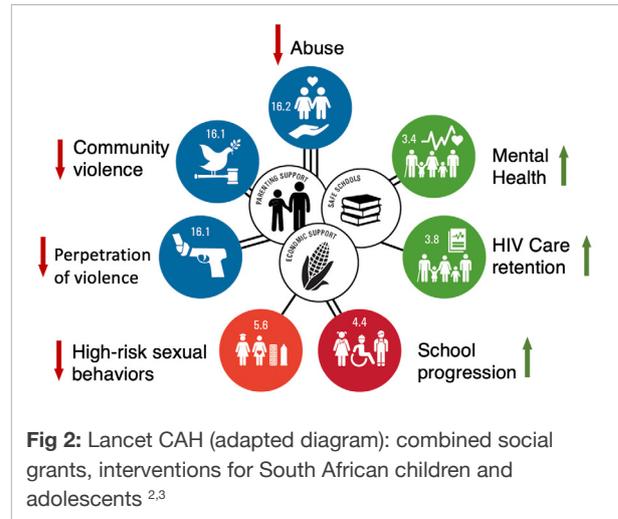
<sup>1</sup> **Disclaimer:** The views, findings, and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USAID, PEPFAR, or the U. S. Government.  
<sup>2</sup> The Global Reference Group on Children Affected by COVID-19 including WHO, University of Oxford, USAID PEPFAR, CDC, UCL, Imperial College London, and the World Bank – led a research study on extreme threats to children during the COVID-19 pandemic, titled “[Children: The Hidden Pandemic \(2022\)](#)”.  
<sup>3</sup> Unwin, H. J. T., Hillis, S., Chen, Y., Cluver, L., Sherr, L., Goldman, P. S., ... & Flaxman, S. (2021). Global, regional, and national minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and caregiver death, by age and family circumstance: a modelling study. *The Lancet CAH*, 6(4), 249-259, 2022 04.  
<sup>4</sup> Lachman, J. M., Kelly, J., Cluver, L. D., Ward, C. L., Hutchings, J., & Gardner, F. Reducing Child Maltreatment in South Africa: Feasibility of a Locally Developed Parenting Program for At-Risk Low-Income Families.

## What works to protect children affected by COVID-19-related orphanhood and vulnerability?

We have strong evidence from South Africa of useful and cost-effective programs to protect children who have lost caregivers:

- Provide families caring for orphaned children with a social grant,
- Strengthen caregiving with a parenting support program,
- Make sure children can go to school.

Figure 2 shows research on HIV-affected children in South Africa. Combined services to strengthen **parenting, economic, and schooling support protects children** from abuse, violence perpetration, and HIV-risk behaviours, and improves education, mental health, and healthcare access. The color-coded circles and numbers represent programming achievements in specific 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and targets respectively, benefitting health, education, gender equality, and peace and justice.



**Fig 2:** Lancet CAH (adapted diagram): combined social grants, interventions for South African children and adolescents <sup>2,3</sup>

## What must can be done now in South Africa?

Care for children who have lost parents or caregivers to COVID-19 or excess deaths must be integrated into the national COVID-19 Response Plan as an urgent priority. The three essential components include:



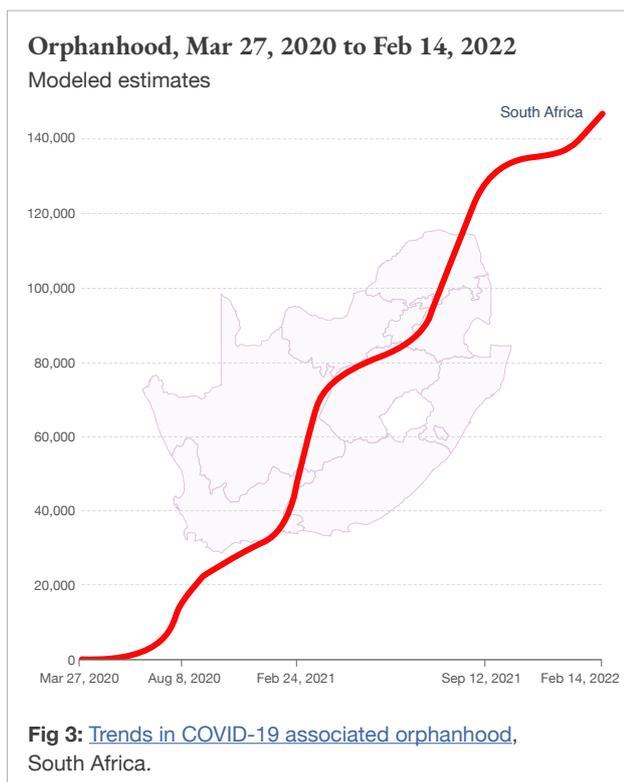
**PREVENT deaths** of parents and caregivers through equitable vaccine coverage, treatment, and robust public health measures.



**PREPARE families** and systems to provide safe and loving family-based care for children who lost their primary caregivers, through kinship care, foster care, or adoption.



**PROTECT children** using evidence-based strategies that reduce poverty and violence and strengthen their recovery. Effective models combine ‘cash plus care’ social grants, evidence-based parenting programs and keeping children in school.



**Fig 3:** Trends in COVID-19 associated orphanhood, South Africa.

In communities, Civil Society Organizations and Faith-Based Organizations are often first line responders, and play a huge role in identifying, connecting with, and caring for children affected by orphanhood and bereavement. Harmonization of community programmes that build parenting skills for surviving caregivers and support education, with national plans on child protection and social protection in South Africa can ensure sustainable and more integrated responses.

COVID-19-associated orphanhood does not come in waves – it is a steadily increasing slope (figure 3). Thus, we as South Africans have a moral imperative to prioritize investments for children who are and who will be orphaned and have increased risks due to COVID-19 within the national COVID-19 Response Plan. Hesitation is a luxury we cannot afford. The time to act and call the world to act, to protect every child, is now.

In the words of Nelson Mandela,

**“there can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”**