

Dynamics of child-parent coresidence in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Short Abstract

The duration children spend living with their parents is crucial for understanding how parental absence shapes well-being and human capital accumulation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, a growing body of literature has documented heterogeneous household contexts of children across countries and over time, with many children experiencing temporary or permanent absence of one or both biological parents. Yet little is known about the expected length of parent-child co-residence and the time children spend in different household contexts. We use the Global Living Arrangements Database and DHS data to address this gap by providing the first estimates of expected years of parent-child co-residence during childhood across the region. We examine changes in the years children spend living with and without their parents and assess whether parental absence is driven by marital dissolution or parental death. Preliminary results reveal substantial cross-country variation, highlighting the roles of marital dissolution and mortality in shaping these dynamics.

Introduction

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of children spend their childhood in households with both or either of their biological parent present. However, a large share of children experiences temporary or permanent absence of one or both parents due to the death, divorce, and/or (re-)marriage of their parent(s) (Cotton, 2021; Lloyd & Desai, 1992; Madhavan, 2004). A growing body of research has explored the associations between such events, the living arrangements of children, and possible consequences for child outcomes (Adjiwanou et al. 2021; Beck et al. 2015; Case & Ardington, 2006; Chae, 2016). A particular focus within the literature has been the practice of child fostering, which refers to arrangements of children living in households without biological parents that are a common feature of the family system in many African countries (Evans et al. 2022; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985; Mason, 2001). Despite this research interest in the living arrangements and the family contexts of children, little is known about the time children can expect to spend living in a household without their biological parents during their childhood and how these dynamics of child-parent coresidence differ across countries and over time. One study is provided by Gaydos (2015) in an article on parental absence in Tanzania; however, the article's focus is on risks and predictors rather than the expected time of absence. While the duration children spend living with their parents during childhood is crucial for understanding how parental absence shapes children's well-being and human capital accumulation (Li & Guo, 2023), it remains understudied in the African context.

We address this gap by providing the first estimates of expected years of parent-child co-residence during childhood across the region and examining how these have changed over time. Specifically, we provide a comprehensive overview of expected length of parent-child co-residence and years children spend in different household contexts over three distinct phases of childhood, under 5, 5-14, and 15-17. Our analyses are based on harmonized microdata for 27 Sub-Saharan African countries, spanning from the 1960s until the present and DHS data collected since 1980s. We aim to answer three overarching research questions: (1) *How long do children co-reside with their biological parents during different childhood phases?*; (2) *How long are children separated from their parents due to marital dissolution versus death?*; and (3) *To what extent do these patterns differ between countries and over time?*

The analyses proceed in three steps: First, we descriptively document patterns and trends in household composition from the children's perspective. We first distinguish between different types of households to capture the presence of biological parents based on each child's (ego) relationships to the other members of the household, focusing on co-residence with both parents, with only the biological mother or the biological father, and children living in households without either parent. Second, we combine the estimates derived in the first step with UN mortality estimates and apply the Sullivan method (Sullivan, 1971), following the

approach proposed by Esteve and Reher (2024), to estimate the time of each phase of childhood an individual can expect to co-reside with parents. In the third steps, we focus on examining and decomposing to what extend parental absence is driven by marital dissolution or parental death. We rely on Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data to address this objective and will compare trends over time and across countries.

The results of this explorative research contribute to a more nuanced discussion on child-parent coresidence in Sub-Saharan Africa and the links between different living arrangements and demographic dynamics. A better understanding of child-parent coresidence at different phases of childhood can provide insights for policymakers or researchers interested in studying the implications of living arrangements for child outcomes and identify potential challenges for families to respond to economic, social, and demographic changes. The article further adds a comparative perspective by analyzing trends over time and differences or similarities between countries to contextualize the results within the literature on family systems and living arrangements in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Background

Living arrangements and household contexts of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are diverse and differ substantially across countries and over time. Households tend to be larger in West African countries, where extended, intergenerational, and polygynous household compositions are more common, compared to Southern and East African countries. Household characteristics also tend to be heterogeneous on the subnational level, with substantial intra-country diversity (Pohl et al. 2025), reflecting heterogeneous living arrangements and family structures. These differences in living arrangements are further shaped by well-developed foster systems and cross-country variation in the prevalence of parental absence from the household due to parental mortality, marriage dynamics and union dissolution, migration patterns, and fosterage systems (Annor et al. 2024; Beegle et al. 2010; Cotton & Oduor, 2025; Cotton et al. 2022; Gaydosh, 2015; Grant & Yeatman, 2014; McDaniel & Zulu, 1996). As a result, many children across African countries spend part of their childhood living apart from either or both biological parents in single-parent or foster households (Lloyd & Desai, 1992; Hampshire et al. 2015; Monasch & Boerma, 2004; Cotton, 2021).

High parental mortality compared to other world regions, linked in part to the prevalence of epidemics such as HIV/AIDS, contribute to larger numbers of children who are paternal, maternal, or double orphans. Estimates suggest that prior to 2015, losses of one or both parents to HIV/AIDS affected around 14.8 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hampshire et al. 2015). These children are often reared in the care of adults other than their parents or by only one of their parents. Additionally, union dissolution in Sub-Saharan Africa is common (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015; John & Nitsche, 2022) marriage customs can contribute to frequent partnering and re-partnering, with implications for children's living arrangements (Grant & Yeatman, 2014). Another factor that contributes to parental absence is migration (Caarls et al. 2018). In these cases, children might be fostered by relatives or non-relatives, and foster arrangements differ in duration and permanence (Madhavan, 2004). Within the literature voluntary and crisis fostering are commonly distinguished, with the former including arrangements that are motivated by voluntary decisions of the parent(s) and are often linked to aims of improving the child's educational opportunity or human capital accumulations or sought out to strengthen kinship bonds and family well-being (Cotton, 2021; Madhavan 2004; Pohl et al. 2025). Crisis fostering, in comparison, refers to childcare arrangements that arise due to parental death or divorce, as well as economic hardship or parental inability to provide care, although the lines between voluntary and crisis fostering are often blurred and shaped by individual, family, and country contexts (Cotton, 2024; Foster, 2000; Hampshire et al. 2015; Bachan, 2014).

Literature across diverse settings suggests that the links between child and adolescent well-being and parental absence are complex (Mazzucato & Cebotari, 2016; Milkie et al. 2015; Sweeney, 2007), but that parental presence can potentially support child well-being and development, as well as behavior and intergenerational relations later in life (Annor et al. 2024; Ariyo et al. 2019; Gaydosh, 2017; Leopold, 2012; Li & Guo, 2023; Neville et al. 2022). However, little is known in the Sub-Saharan African context about the time children can expect to spend living in a household without their biological parents during their childhood and how these

dynamics of child-parent co-residence differ across countries and over time. A better understanding of the duration of living arrangements of children could contribute a starting point for further research on the links between child-parent co-residence and child outcomes in Africa. Moreover, child parent co-residence might also benefit parents: in many Sub-Saharan African contexts, children are central to family life and provide emotional, social, and practical support to parents, especially at older ages. Sustained co-residence can strengthen intergenerational bonds (Leopold, 2012) which is particularly important in settings where formal care provision is limited, and cultural norms emphasize familial responsibility and solidarity. These dynamics are especially relevant given the region's rapid population ageing and changing household structures in absence of well-developed welfare state systems.

A particular focus within the literature has been the effects of child fostering on children's well-being and educational attainment in the context of orphanhood (Beegle et al. 2010; Case et al. 2004; Chuong & Operario, 2012; Grant & Yeatman, 2012) or union dissolution (Adjiwanou et al. 2021; Chae, 2016; Crespin-Boucaud & Hotte, 2021), in which researchers face the challenge of separating any negative impacts of a crisis or demographic event on children or their family, from the effects of the living arrangement itself. Additionally, studies child outcomes in the context of living arrangements need to account for selection biases. Beck et al. (2015). found that out-fostered boys often had educational advantages prior to fostering and were placed in households that improved their education, while girls were often placed into households that required more domestic work. Based on data from Burkina Faso, Akresh (2009) observed that fostered children may fare worse than host family children but better than their biological siblings. Hedges et al. (2019) reported that in Tanzania, children fostered with distant kin show lower educational progression, but children living only with their biological father have worse educational outcomes than those living with close kin. While studies comparing fostered children to their biological siblings can be informative, data on sending and receiving households are often unavailable (Beck et al., 2015) Verhoef and Morelli (2007) argue that fostering is not a good variable to study child outcomes because of the variability of circumstances and experiences. Foster children's experiences depend on household and kinship structures, as well as the motives of households to out- or in-foster a child (Gaydos, 2017; Hedges et al. 2019; Madhavan, 2004; Serra, 2009). Children who live in households without their parents but with close relatives, such as grandparents, may fare better as closer kin are more invested in the children's well-being (Ariyo et al. 2019; Case et al. 2004; Hedges et al. 2019; Parker & Short, 2019). However, Madhavan (2004) points out that close kin, such as grandmothers, might feel emotionally attached but are not well-equipped to raise children compared to younger, more distant relatives.

While research suggests that out-fostering of children has remained stable in most Sub-Saharan African countries from the mother's perspective (Cotton, 2021), broad changes in social, economic, and demographic factors nonetheless affect the incidence of children experiencing parental absence over the course of their childhood and the duration of these periods. Fostering and shared childrearing constitute key pillars of many African family systems, yet drivers of fostering arrangements and parental absence differ across time and context and are shaped by social, economic, and demographic factors (Akresh, 2009; Evans et al. 2022; Hedges et al. 2019; Vandermeersch, 2002). Thus, the prevalence of different living arrangements and the duration thereof might reflect ongoing population dynamics and socio-economic changes. This is particularly relevant as dynamics of union dissolution, and parental mortality might be changing over time, resulting in different household compositions and living arrangements of children.

Within this study, we will focus on two potential determinants of living arrangements of children and their changes over time: First, we will examine living arrangements linked to orphanhood (maternal, paternal, double) across Sub-Saharan African countries and explore links between parental mortality and the time children spent living in households with both biological parents, either biological parent, or neither. Second, we will explore the prevalence of living arrangements and their duration in the context of marital and fertility dynamics, such as nonmarital childbearing, early marriage and childbearing, divorce rates, and remarriage trends. These dynamics likely increase the likelihood that children will live, at least temporarily, without one or both parents and may point toward a growing prevalence of single-parent household. Both orphanhood and marital dynamics are closely intertwined with norms surrounding child custody, which might reflect marriage and family

systems, as well as differences between countries and over time. A comparative overview of the prevalence of different living arrangements of children, their duration in the context of changing social and demographic dynamics, will lay the foundation for a better understanding on the links between family context, living arrangements, and child outcomes.

Data and Methods

Data

We use harmonized census microdata obtained via the novel Global Living Arrangements Database (GLAD) for 27 African countries (Galeano & Esteve, 2025). The database provides information on each individual's living arrangements based on intra-household relationships. Rather than relying on relationships in reference to a household head, the database is based on an algorithm that detangles all relationships and offers them from the individual's ("ego") perspective. This allows for the creation of ego-based categories of living arrangements at different ages. For the purpose of this study, we use the single ages dataset, which provides information aggregated by age, sex, marital status, and educational attainment. The data are suited for the study of the presence or absence of parents in the household, as well as more detailed exploration of other household members in different household constellations, as the database provides information on the presence of either parent, siblings, grandparents, other relatives, and/or non-relatives of the children. The GLAD enables the flexible creation of household typologies required for the study of different living arrangements (Galeano & Esteve, 2025).

We further use survey data provided by the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) program, which are standardized and nationally-representative. While the DHS primarily focuses on demographic and health characteristics of women and children, it also provides a household-roster with information on all regular members of the household that can be linked with the information collected for children. The data structure facilitates a detailed study of living arrangements and family circumstances of children across countries. We selected all Sub-Saharan African countries included in the DHS with at least two available survey rounds, that included a household roster, as well as information on the survival and marital status of biological parents. Additionally, we use life tables from the 2024 World Population Prospects (United Nations, 2024) to obtain life expectancy estimates for children and parents.

Analytical Strategy

First, we obtain descriptive rates of child-parent co-residence during three different childhood phases: 0-4, 5-14, 15-17. We focus on four distinct living arrangements (1) living with both biological parents; (2) living with the biological mother only; (3) living with the biological father only; (4) living in a household without biological parents. These descriptive rates provide the starting point for our analysis of duration. We estimate the expected durations, in years, children reside with their parent(s) across samples and explore how these dynamics have changed over time within countries and how they differ across countries. For children who do not reside with either or both parents, we estimate expected duration of living with other relatives compared to non-relatives, and how this has changed over time. Lastly, for children who live without parents we compare durations of living without a parent linked to parental death, union dissolution, and single parenthood (never married parent).

Following the approaches put forward by Esteve and Reher (2024) and by Kye and Choi (2021), we estimate the lifetime children can be expected to spend in different living arrangements (Sullivan, 1971). To focus on the four different living arrangements outlined above and to include dynamics parental death, union dissolution, and single parent, we include all children for which information on parental survival and marital status is available. Additionally, we select children with complete information for the relationship to the household head, as well as the pointer variables providing information on the line numbers of parents in the household is available. We estimate the prevalence of divorce and non-marital childbearing in the survey samples, and we use life table estimates for child and parental survival and remaining life expectancy. Following the approach outlined by Esteve and Reher (2024), we estimate exposure rates to different living arrangements for a given

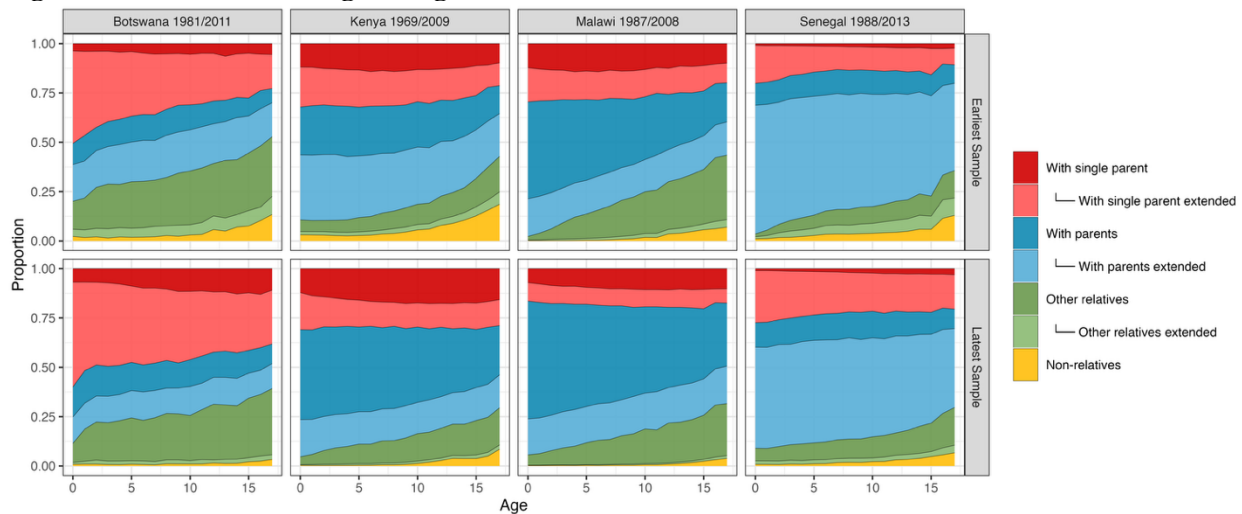
year, based on DHS data, and compare it to data from the GLAD. We then calculate the lifetime children can be expected to spend in different living arrangements (Sullivan, 1971). These results allow us to decompose and compare the time of childhood spent living with both parents, with the biological mother only, with the biological father only, or in a household without either parent present.

Preliminary Findings and Next Steps

Figure 1 provides an overview of the prevalence of seven different categories of living arrangement of children aged 0-17 for the earliest (upper panels) and latest (lower panels) available samples from four selected countries. Color groups indicate a type of living arrangement, with the lighter color highlighting and extended version of the corresponding living arrangement, meaning other relatives and/or non-relatives of the child are present in the household. Other living arrangements, such as living alone, only account for a marginal proportion of the population of children and were excluded from the figure. Overall, the findings suggest shared patterns but also distinct changes in the living arrangements of children in the four countries over time.

In Botswana, the share of children living with only a single parent or with a single parent in an extended household increased across all phases of childhood between 1981 and 2011. In the latest available sample for the country, more than half of all children begin their life in a household with one parent absent. The share of children living in foster households without parents but with other relatives, remained stable over the years observed in Botswana. However, the share of children living with non-relatives decreased, suggesting either that foster arrangements with non-relatives might be becoming less prevalent. Since the decrease is pronounced in the later phase of childhood it could also indicate a delay in home-leaving.

Figure 1. Overview of Living Arrangements of Children in Four Selected Countries.



In Kenya, extended living arrangements decreased between 1969 and 2009. In the latest available sample, children living with a single parent or with both parents tend to live in households without other relatives or non-relatives. The share of children fostered by other relatives remained consistent and also among this group, living with non-relatives has become uncommon. Similar to Botswana, the share of children living with non-relatives decreased, particularly in the later phase of childhood, suggesting a later transition to adulthood. The patterns in Malawi largely resemble the pattern of Kenya, although in the later sample, single parenthood appears to be less common in Malawi compared to Kenya. Lastly, in Senegal, living in extended households remains the prevalent arrangement for children living with a single parent or both parents, although the share of living in an extended household with a single parent, compared to living with both parents, increased between 1988 and 2013. The proportion of children living without parents remains relatively constant over time, but a larger share of children are fostered in households with other relatives but without non-relatives present. Across all countries a slight hump in the proportion of children living in households with other-relatives or non-

relatives present starting around age 15, suggests that some children transition to living with a partner, around that age.

To answer the research questions and further continue this study, the next steps will closely follow the outlined analytical strategy. We continue using the data from the GLAD to provide an overview of child-parent co-residence for the more than 70 samples of the 27 selected African countries, allowing for both time and cross-county comparisons. The focus beyond descriptive rates for selected living arrangements will be to obtain a more nuanced overview of the presence of other household members from the child perspectives, such as the presence of grandparents. Next, we will use DHS data to explore the duration of different living arrangements and possible variations in the duration of living arrangements linked to common reasons of parental absence: orphanhood, divorce, and single parenthood. Duration of living arrangements of children remains an understudied aspect of childhood in the African context, despite evidence suggesting that the time spent living with or without parents not only has consequences for child outcomes but also matters for the development of intra-family bonds and relationships that can be crucial for care provision, as well as health and emotional well-being outcomes across generations.

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