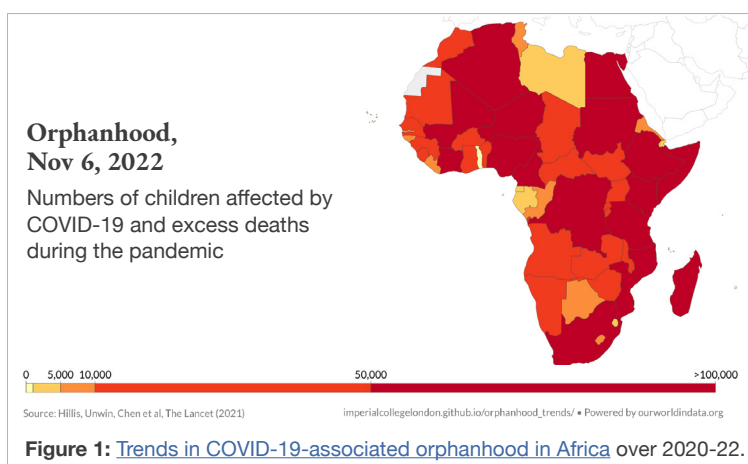




COVID-19-Associated Orphanhood in Zambia¹

An urgent call to deliver support for orphaned and vulnerable children through national action plans.



Global, Regional, and Zambia Minimum Estimates.

New evidence shows alarming patterns of childhood vulnerability, especially among families exposed to COVID-19-associated deaths¹. **Globally, it is estimated that more than 10.5 million children have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19 as of May 2022¹.** Furthermore, in Africa, it is estimated that over 2.5 million children have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19 in just two years (figure 1). Research shows that COVID-19 deaths are underreported; therefore, these estimates are based on the total number of deaths from any cause occurring during the pandemic, reflecting the true impact of the pandemic². Therefore, any child that lost a parent or caregiver during the pandemic is vulnerable and must be identified and linked to care. Zambia had a minimum of 64,300 children bereaved by the death of a parent or caregiver due to COVID-19, by November³ 2022.

Losing A Parent or Caregiver.

Research shows that children who have lost a parent or caregiver have higher risks of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and exploitation, which may lead to HIV infections, mental health problems, economic strain, and food insecurity¹. In Zambia, as of 2018, **10.2% of children had lost one or both parents, and 32.1% of households were caring for children who were not biologic children of the household head.** The number of children affected by COVID-19 orphanhood in Zambia nearly doubled over six months from July 2021 through December 2021, compared to the first 12 months of the pandemic, further worsening the orphanhood crises. As we have learned from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, these children need immediate support to prevent the immediate and generational impact of these challenges³.

Increasing Childhood Vulnerability in COVID-19.

HIV and COVID-19 are similar in that they cause high mortality among Zambia's most vulnerable populations.^{4,1} The death of the head of the household can increase family poverty, violence, and transactional sexual exploitation for adolescent girls. Grandparents also have a significant role in caregiving and financial support. With high COVID-19-related mortality rates in older people, the crisis is exacerbated. With this significant parent or caregiver loss, it is essential that children at risk of separation from their families are not placed in institutions – which are detrimental to their health, wellbeing, development, and safety. The Zambia government has worked with key partners to promote family-based care for orphaned children⁴. Therefore, it is critical now to guarantee investments in safe and nurturing family-based care for those who have lost their caregivers during the pandemic.

With over **30,300** estimated excess pandemic deaths by **November 7, 2022** due to all causes occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia, the Imperial College London's [Orphanhood Tracker](#) further reports at a minimum in Zambia:

54,700

children have lost one or both parent(s) to COVID-19.

57,500

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

64,300

children have lost their primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-19.

In Zambia, for every single excess pandemic death that occurs, two children lose a parent or caregiver.

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.

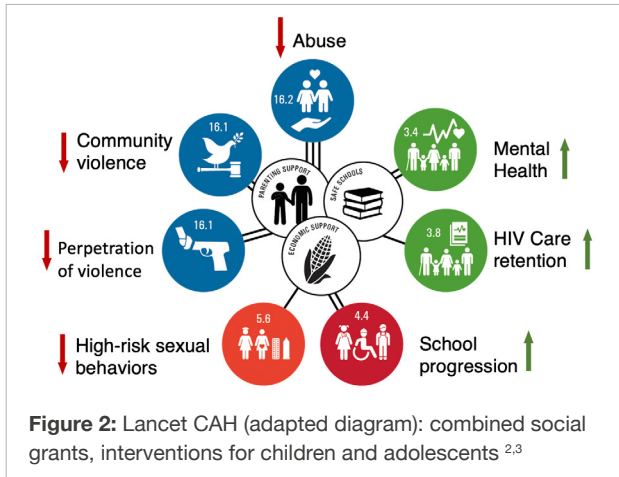
The Global Reference Group on Children Affected by COVID-19 including WHO, University of Oxford, USAID PEPFAR, CDC, UCL, Imperial College London, and the World Bank – led a research study on extreme threats to children during the COVID-19 pandemic, titled [“Children: The Hidden Pandemic”](#) (September 2022).

¹ Hillis S, N'konzi JN, Msemburi W, et al. Orphanhood and Caregiver Loss Among Children Based on New Global Excess COVID-19 Death Estimates. *JAMA Pediatr*. Published online September 06, 2022. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.3157

² Wang H, Paulson K R, Pease S A et al. Estimating excess mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic analysis of COVID-19-related mortality, 2020–21, *The Lancet*, Volume 399, Issue 10334, 2022, Pages 1513–1536, ISSN 0140-6736, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)02796-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02796-3)

³ 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.

⁴ The Children's Code Bill, National Assembly of Zambia. Available [here](#)

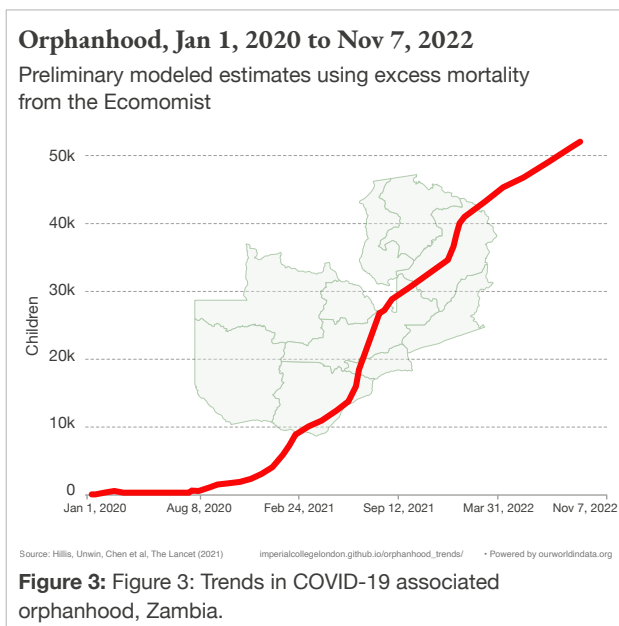


What works to protect children affected by COVID-19-related orphanhood and vulnerability?

We have strong evidence of valuable 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 that combined services to strengthen **parenting, economic, and schooling support protect children** from abuse, violence perpetration, and HIV-risk behaviors. These combined services also improve education, mental health, and healthcare access and reduce abuse, community violence, violence perpetration, and high-risk sexual behaviors. 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.



What can be done now in Zambia?

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.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Faith-Based Organizations are often first-line responders who help in identifying, connecting with, and caring for children and adolescents in need. To strengthen comprehensive identification of children affected by parent or caregiver death, countries may benefit from the Brazil experience: their routine inclusion on the death certificate of ‘number of children living in the home’ was strategic for identifying and catalyzing policies for children orphaned during the pandemic. To deliver much-needed support to families and children, the Zambian government, launched the [COVID-19 Emergency cash transfer](#) and a [national campaign to promote family-based care](#). Harmonization of community programs that build parenting skills for surviving caregivers and support education, with active surveillance and national plans on child protection, social protection, and pandemic response in Zambia, can ensure responses.

Overall, this scope expansion to build parenting skills for surviving caregivers and support education, child protection, and socio-economic protection in Zambia, fully aligned with those proposed in the ‘PREPARE families’ and ‘PROTECT children’ approaches above, can ensure sustainable child protection responses and impact. COVID-19-associated orphanhood does not come in waves – it is a steadily increasing slope (figure 3). Thus, we 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 emergency Response Plan. Hesitation is a luxury we cannot afford. The time to act, to protect every child, is now.

In the words of **Kenneth Kaunda**,

“The moment you have protected an individual, you have protected society.”