

Disciplinary Practices among Orphaned Children in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction and Research Question

Eradicating violent discipline has been a central aim of international human rights organizations in recent decades. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, affirmed children's rights to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence from parents or caretakers. Despite the diffusion of laws banning corporal punishment¹ about half of children living in low- and middle-income countries experience corporal punishment at home.² This form of discipline is associated with negative developmental outcomes such as greater anxiety and aggression.³ The ubiquity and impact of this practice make it an important topic for those concerned with child adversity and well-being.

The study of disciplinary practices in the home has largely centered on biological parents and their children; little is known about the practices caretakers use with orphaned children. There is reason to believe that orphaned children may be at greater risk of violent discipline than other children. Caretakers of orphaned children tend to report elevated stress levels, which is an oft-cited correlate of corporal punishment. Previous studies have documented that orphaned children are at greater risk of other forms of discrimination compared with non-orphaned children, including lower school enrollment, greater neglect, and greater exploitation through child labor.⁴ Building on this literature, the primary question motivating our study is: *Are orphaned children at higher risk of violent discipline than non-orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa?* We focus on this region because it has relatively high levels of both violent discipline and parental death.

Data and Methods

Data for this study come from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), which is a household survey developed by the United Nations Children's Fund focusing on maternal and

¹ Brehm HN, Boyle EH (2017). "The Global Adoption of National Policies Protecting Children from Violent Discipline in Schools and Homes, 1950-2011." *Law & Society Review*, 52(1): 206-233.

² UNICEF, *Child Disciplinary Practices at Home: Evidence from a Range of Low- and Middle-Income Countries*, New York, 2010 ("UNICEF").

³ Lansford JE, et al. (2014). "Corporal Punishment, Maternal Warmth, and Child Adjustment: A Longitudinal Study in Eight Countries." *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 43(4): 670-685.

⁴ Nyamukapa CA, et al. (2010). "Causes and consequences of psychological distress among orphans in eastern Zimbabwe." *AIDS Care*, 22(8): 988-996.

child health in low- and middle-income countries. Specifically, these data come from the most recent available MICS surveys of Benin, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. All surveys were conducted between 2010 and 2017. The pooled sample includes 117,702 children aged 2-14, and is weighted to represent the broader population of children in each country. The availability of comparable discipline data across nationally-representative samples renders MICS an invaluable tool for this study.

Our dependent variable comes from the MICS child discipline module. This module randomly selects one child from the household roster, then asks that child's caretaker to report whether 11 different disciplinary actions had been used with him or her in the last 30 days by any household member. The list of actions includes forms of corporal punishment (e.g., spanking), psychologically aggressive punishment (e.g., calling child dumb), and non-violent punishment (e.g., taking away privileges). In our preliminary analysis, we form dichotomous indicators of physical punishment and non-violent punishment, where the presence of any form of punishment in each category is coded as one.

Our main independent variable, orphan status, is a dichotomous variable that describes whether both a child's parents are deceased. This variable is constructed from separate questions on the household roster that asks for all children under age 18 whether their mother and father are living. 1,813 children representing 1.33 percent of our weighted sample were orphans.

We also included a rich set of control variables to reduce the risk of potential confounders. These included characteristics of the child (age and sex), household (urban status, number of children present, and whether the child's parents are present in the household), and caretaker (age, sex, education, and belief that corporal punishment is necessary to bring up a child properly). These variables are frequently associated with corporal punishment in various national contexts.⁵

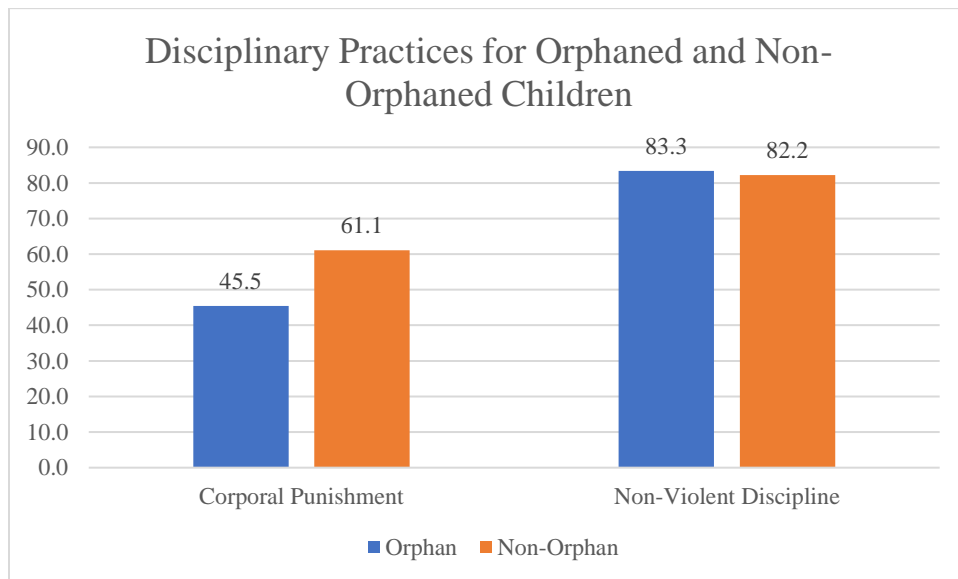
We use multilevel logistic regression to estimate the effect of orphan status on the odds of experiencing corporal punishment and non-violent discipline. Multilevel analyses are usually appropriate when individuals are clustered in units, such as political/ethnic boundaries. In our analysis, the first level represents the individual children along with their household and caretaker characteristics. The second level represents the region of the country in which they

⁵ UNICEF.

reside. Using region rather than country as the second level allows for both within- and between-country variation. Our models include a fixed coefficients for all level one independent variables, plus a random coefficient for orphan status since this yielded the best fitting model.

Preliminary Results

Surprisingly, orphaned children are not at greater risk of corporal punishment. On the contrary, the bivariate relationship shows that they are substantially less likely to experience corporal punishment than non-orphaned children. The figure below shows that 45.5 percent of orphaned children experienced some form of corporal punishment in the 30 days prior to the survey, compared with 61.1 percent of non-orphaned children. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Orphaned and non-orphaned children experience non-violent discipline at approximately the same rate.



In our multivariate analysis, we did not find any variable that fully explains the reduced risk of corporal punishment among orphaned children. Our preliminary results are displayed in the table below. Both models report odds ratios and standard errors. Contrary to our expectations, orphans are *less* likely to experience corporal punishment (OR = 0.789, $p < 0.05$) and more likely to experience non-violent punishment (OR = 2.104, $p < 0.001$) than other children. The child's age and sex, absence of parents in the household, and caretaker's age, sex, education, and support for corporal punishment also predicted disciplinary practices. However, none of these variables explained the association between orphan status and experience of either form of discipline.

Multilevel Logistic Regression of Disciplinary Practices (N=117,702)

	(1)		(2)	
	Corporal Punishment		Non-Violent Discipline	
Fixed Effects				
<u>Child Characteristics</u>				
Orphan	0.789*	(0.084)	2.104***	(0.472)
Age				
2-4	0.852***	(0.028)	0.413***	(0.019)
(5-9)	1		1	
10-14	0.654***	(0.024)	1.221***	(0.055)
Female	0.900***	(0.018)	0.985	(0.030)
<u>Household Characteristics</u>				
Urban	1.051	(0.035)	1.040	(0.053)
Number of children	1.011	(0.007)	0.978	(0.014)
No parent present	0.793***	(0.029)	1.015	(0.050)
<u>Caretaker Characteristics</u>				
Age				
(< 25)	1		1	
25 - 44	1.053	(0.030)	1.293***	(0.059)
> 44	0.928*	(0.030)	1.237***	(0.066)
Female	1.561***	(0.101)	1.369**	(0.134)
Education				
(None)	1		1	
Primary	1.103**	(0.034)	1.279***	(0.054)
Secondary +	1.044	(0.044)	1.399***	(0.090)
Support corp. punishment	3.230***	(0.163)	2.010***	(0.117)
Random Effects				
Variance (Orphan)	4.464***	(1.788)	27.820***	(21.320)
Variance (Region)	1.550***	(0.073)	1.952***	(0.171)
Covariance (Orphan, Region)	1.109	(0.074)	1.009	(0.138)
AIC	383,201.7		216,131.5	
BIC	383,366.2		216,296.0	

While these preliminary results are suggestive, we will continue to develop this analysis in several ways: controlling for the child's relationship to the household head and adding fixed effects for level two variables. We will also consult quantitative and qualitative studies of orphan caretakers to help interpret our results.