

CHILDREN GROW UP IN UNSAFE ENVIRONMENTS

Single-parent households the norm, says study

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SINGLE-PARENT households have become the norm in South Africa, while nearly 100 000 children live in child-headed households.

The South African Institute of Race Relations released these and other findings in a new report yesterday.

The study also found that 32 percent of sexually active 12- to 22-year-olds have had four or more partners while the majority, 62 percent, were not consistent condom users.

About 31 percent of youth had consumed alcohol and 62 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds said they had easy access to alcohol.

The report, titled *The First Steps to Healing the South African Family*, documents the extent of family breakdown in South Africa and its effect on children and the youth.

Katharine Hall, a senior researcher at the Children's Institute based at University of

Cape Town (UCT), who co-authored one of the papers cited in the report, said it was important to look at the factors behind the living arrangements of families and not make assumptions based on the figures.

"I think the bottom line is we shouldn't assume that poor families are not acting in the best interest of children."

Hall said families often had to make difficult "trade-offs" in order to survive, including when parents left their children in the care of relatives to find employment elsewhere.

Effect

Hall said the report had rightly emphasised the effect on children of poverty, unemployment, inequality and HIV.

The information presented in the report was gathered from different sources, including UCT and StatsSA, and compiled by the institute.

Some statistics presented in the report included:

- Only a third of children

are growing up living with both of their parents.

- Nearly one million children have lost both their parents, the majority to HIV/Aids.

- There are 98 000 children living in child-headed households, 81 percent of whom have a living mother.

- Nine million children (48 percent) are growing up with absent but living fathers.

The report tracked the effects on children and young people of unstable families. It referred to international and local research which had found that children growing up without both parents are at a significant disadvantage in educational outcomes, employment prospects, behaviour, and relationships.

Lucy Holborn, family project manager at the institute, said children growing up without families led to uncertain futures.

The research found youth unemployment figures stood at 51 percent and there were 3.3 million young people not in

education, employment, or training. "Many South African children are not growing up in safe and secure families. Some are affected by poverty, while others are burdened by the effects of the HIV/Aids pandemic.

"This pandemic has resulted in an epidemic of orphanhood and child-headed households, which has left many children having to fend for themselves," the report read. It cited statistics which found the number of children with absent, but living, fathers had increased from 42 percent in 1996 to 48 percent in 2009.

"Single-parent households are the norm in South Africa, with the majority of children growing up with one parent.

"Increasing numbers of fathers are absent, and a 'crisis of men' in South Africa seems to be perpetuating patterns of abuse and desertion that will most likely continue."

The report also said that violence within families was found to be a "major contributing factor to youth crime".