

Researcher

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Updated: November 2009



Enhancing the Economic, Health, and Social Capabilities of Highly Vulnerable Youth

Young people in South Africa face a high risk of HIV, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and unemployment, and are further disadvantaged by the actual or potential loss of one or both parents to HIV and conditions of poverty, inequality, and food insecurity. These circumstances make the transition from childhood to adulthood especially difficult, and many of the most disadvantaged are in danger of falling even farther behind socially and economically due to illness, stigma, and the loss of key supportive adults such as parents and teachers. Many programs fail to recognize that young people's vulnerabilities differ by ethnicity, age, gender, SES, social connectedness, and orphanhood status. What's more, few programs for young people have been evaluated to show what their actual impact is.

Baseline findings from the study show program participants to be a vulnerable group, facing situations of orphaning, poverty, and lack of supportive structures to deal with such circumstances. However, these factors seem to have a variety of connections with behaviors and experiences that affect sexual and reproductive health and HIV. In some cases protective factors for females and males are common but their influence may be on different behaviors. In other cases factors associated with healthy outcomes and behaviors differ by gender. A second round of data collection is currently underway which will allow us to assess the program's short-term impacts on young people's vulnerabilities and experiences.

Country where the research is taking place

South Africa

How does the research describe the impact of population/reproductive health on poverty reduction and/or economic growth?

Although we will not have direct evidence until our second round data are collected, we have indications from the school principals that pregnancy rates of learners have dropped in the schools that are receiving the program. If this is in fact the case, it would be very important: teenage pregnancy is a major cause of school disruption for girls in South Africa and it contributes to perpetuating a cycle of intergenerational poverty.

How will the research address a policy need, and what kind of policy lesson is expected?

This project can help inform policymakers about issues they need to consider to design effective programs for vulnerable youth. It can fill this knowledge gap by addressing

the specific conditions of young people's lives and testing an intervention that includes strategies for young people to build social and economic assets and better protect themselves against HIV and early pregnancy. The intervention includes social skills; analysis of power relations within the community; HIV/AIDS information and knowledge of contraceptives and pregnancy; financial education; as well as information about further education and training and entrepreneurship. Interpersonal skill and assertiveness are included to enable young people to continue to acquire information and apply it in their daily lives—today and going forward.

Methods/Data used

The work was carried out with 1,200 students in seven schools in the Engonyameni area outside of Durban. The project adapts a curriculum that was originally designed for out-of-school young people and applies those lessons to in-school teens ages 16 to 19 (10th and 11th graders) at baseline.

Findings from our pilot research (quantitative and qualitative) inform our data collection. Care has been exercised to ensure that measures are appropriate for the age group, context, intervention design, and data collection method. We are conducting a longitudinal survey, assessing target outcomes and determinants thereof, in particular the impact of the intervention on:

- Formation of aspirations.
- Economic skills.
- Social capital.
- HIV/AIDS and RH knowledge, prevention behaviors, and adoption of safer sex strategies. The baseline field work

was carried out with male and female learners over a period of eight weeks starting in April 2008. Interviews were carried out in the respondents' homes, and care was taken to ensure privacy. The second round of data are being collected November 2009 to January 2010. We plan to conduct focus groups with participants, their guardians, and with project mentors to assess the acceptability and comprehension of the intervention components, feasibility of where and when the intervention was delivered, and beliefs regarding the efficacy of the intervention for the desired outcomes.

The study includes the following groups: adolescents in one set of classrooms receive financial skills, social capital building activities, and HIV/AIDS-SRH education; those in the second arm received only social capital building and HIV/AIDS-SRH education; while those in the third arm will receive an intervention in 2010 (after the other second round of data is collected) and serve as controls.