

# The Impact of Stepfamily Structures and their Dynamics on the Phenomenon of Children Living and Working on the Streets in the North-West Province of South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** There is a concerning increase in children living on South African streets. This surge is influenced by poverty, family instability, parental separation, domestic violence and child maltreatment. Research suggests that stepfamily environments tend to be unstable and characterized by strained relationships, making them less ideal than traditional family structures. This paper aims to investigate the impact of stepfamily dynamics on the prevalence of children living and working on the streets in South Africa. **Methodology:** Attachment theory is used, and it draws upon qualitative data gathered from a Ph.D. study. The dataset consists of information collected from 15 street children receiving services at two drop-in centres in the North West Province, South Africa, and their parents (total: 30 participants). In-depth interviews were conducted in Setswana. Data were manually coded, and (sub-) themes were analysed. Ethical approval was obtained from North-West University. **Findings:** The study reveals that a lower proportion of children emerged from nuclear families (13%) and extended families (14%) as compared to those from single-parent families (40%) and stepfamilies (33%). A separate paper looked at the single parent family. It is important to explore stepfamily and single parent family dynamics separately, as they have unique family processes. This paper specifically looks at various dynamics in stepfamily structures, where children cited mistreatment by stepparents as the primary reason for them turning to the streets. **Implications:** It is essential to strengthen family and children's policies, to encourage parents to engage in social programs and receive support from social workers, and to facilitate their adaptation to stepfamilies and stepchildren. **Originality:** This is one of the first papers that explores the impact of stepfamily structures and their dynamics on the phenomenon of children living and working on the streets in South Africa

**Keywords:** *Children living and working on the streets, stepfamily, stepparent, stepchildren*

## INTRODUCTION:

Mooney, Knox & Schacht (2007) find it likely for children to experience the effects of divorce or parental separation, of a lone parent, or when growing up in a stepfamily. Contributory push factors exacerbating the phenomenon of children living and working on the streets in South Africa include the following: increasing instability and dissolution of parental unions, and domestic violence that includes child maltreatment. Differentiating between children living in different types of two-parent families provides a more nuanced understanding of the biological, family environment, family instability and the parental selection mechanisms through which family structure influences a child's outcomes.

Family structure has different effects on various aspects of children's lives (Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008, p. 435-451). Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994, p. 359-381) find stepfamilies are assumed to be worse off than first-marriage families. For example, adapting to the stepparent role is not the same as a biological parent role. In non-divorced families, authoritative parenting is characterized by strong warmth and support, and moderately strong, however responsive, discipline is related to positive children's adjustment (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). For Idemudia et al. (2013, p. 161) children living and working on the streets in Mahikeng, Northwest Province, leave home for disobeying their parents. Children seek release from parental control, hating control of their behavior and about their whereabouts, and thus run away from their homes. Kanyane (2016, p. 92-106) found children cannot stand harsh parental discipline, and harsh parental measures for ill-discipline are a major contributory factor for children to run away from their families, and to leave comfortable homes to live in the street.

Children's turning to the streets means freedom from parental discipline, strict rule and even maltreatment, and the freedom to behave inappropriately. The result is attitude changes, drug use, curfew violations and joining a gang (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Although the single parent family structure forms a higher proportion from the findings of the broader study, a separate paper looked at the single parent family. Single parent and stepfamily structures have unique family dynamics, and reasons provided by participants varied based on the type of a family structure they emerged from. For the stepfamily, children cited mistreatment by their stepparents as the primary reason for them to end up on the streets.

It thus becomes important to explore various dynamics of these two-family structures separately. This paper specifically aims to understand the impact of stepfamily structure and their social dynamics on street children living and working on South African streets.

## LITERATURE REVIEW:

### Defining children living and working on the street:

The Children's Act no 38 of 2005, defines a street child as one who (a) because of abuse, neglect, poverty, community upheaval or any other reason, has left his or her home, family or community and lives, begs or works on the streets; or (b) because of inadequate care, begs or works on the streets but returns home at night (Department of Social development, n.d).

### Defining the stepfamily:

Papernow (2013) defined a stepfamily sociologically, as a union of two adults through marriage, cohabitation or civil partnership, and when only one or two of the couples have their very own children in their past relationships.

Remarriages usually occur swiftly after divorce, with 30% of people getting married immediately after one year (Clarke & Wilson, 1994, p. 305-310). Research on remarriage mainly reflects on issues of step-parenting and blending of two families (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007; Faber, 2004; Stokes & Wampler, 2002; p. 91-108). A complex set of dynamics occur remarried family systems, with great challenges for children and the stepparents. Stepfamilies see competition between the biological parent-child dyad and the new marital dyad, with the biological dyad often winning out (Dupuis, 2007, p. 91-104; Papernow, 1987, p. 630-639).

### Relationships in the stepfamily:

Despite significant research on parent-child relationships after divorce, less is known about step-parent-stepchild relationship after divorce (Bumpass et al., 1995, p. 425-436). McGee (2012) found stepparent-stepchild relationships as a solid determining factor towards living in a stepfamily, for the children. For Adler, Baeder & Higginbotham (2004, p.448-458); and Bernstein (2000), remarriage successes rely on

effective step relationships. The quality of relationship amongst those two parties appear to eventually build or destroy a stepfamily. Hetherington and Kelly (2003), and Weaver and Coleman (2005) assert that how stepchildren behave can significantly affect stepparent reactions, the quality of the relationships amongst them and the quality of their stepparent and remarriage experience.

For De'Aths' (1992) control and discipline creates huge friction in stepparent and stepchildren relationships, due to the belief that if there are no blood relationships, parents cannot come up with demands. Good relationships with stepparent are earned gradually, and stepchildren prefer respect and understanding without their stepparents meddling in their businesses (Cartwright, 2005; Ganong, et al., 2011; Moore & Cartwright, 2005; Schrodt, 2006; Schmeckle, 2007).

#### ***Advantages of stepfamily:***

It is a misrepresentation to assume that stepfamily life is an interminable struggle (Furstenberg, 1987), and only a few authors criticize the unfairness in relation to the discussions of negative aspects of stepfamily life. Problematic areas in stepfamilies are vital to look at, but it is also crucial to recognize the positive aspects of stepfamilies (McGee, 2012). Cherlin & Furstenberg (1994, p. 359-381) found most stepparents reported to be happy with their roles and their new families. Moreover, well-functioning stepfamilies may decrease the risks of poor child outcomes associated with divorce (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Hetherington, 2003; Pryor, 2001). Shafer and Pace (2015, p. 115-12) argue that parent and stepparent support can potentially lower stress on children from such families.

McGee (2012) found one advantage of stepfamilies was to gain extra siblings, while Braithwaite et al. (2001, p. 221-247), saw good adolescent relationships with half-siblings as associated with adolescent generally developing good behaviours. Visher and Visher (2003, p. 523-538) suggest that the nature of stepsibling relationships is a strong predictor of stepfamily experiences. Stepsiblings' relations bring friendship feelings and experience to a child's world (McGee, 2012). Newman (1999, p. 5-9) found numerous stepsiblings adapting positively, as ties and close relationships grow, especially if children share life experiences, age and gender.

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

This paper draws from a qualitative PhD study investigating family structure and its dynamics on street children phenomenon in the North West Province, South Africa. A non-probability purposive sample was used, with in-depth interviews employed. 15 children and 15 parents were interviewed, to get their views of both on the phenomenon, totaling to 30 participants. Parents views are seen to be crucial, rather than only taking account of children's views only.

Centre managers, the site of the study, assisted to select the children in the centers, and who met the study's sample criteria. Ethical approval was obtained from North-West University.

The age range was 15-18 years old that are beneficiaries of the two drop-in centres in the North West Province. They emerged from different family structures including single parent family, stepfamily, nuclear family and extended family. From these types, a lower proportion of children emerged from nuclear families (13%), followed by extended families (14%), while the single parent family was higher (40%), followed by those that are from stepfamily which formed the second highest proportion (33%). Children from stepfamilies mainly cited stepparent's mistreatment, as the reason for going to the street, as per the theme discussed below. Data was manually coded, presented and analysed in the form of themes and sub themes.

#### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:**

##### ***Step-parenting dynamics vs child discipline and child treatment as the influence of the phenomenon of children living and working on the streets.***

A sixteen (16)-year-old male child from a stepfamily stated that his stepmother mistreats him, and that is why he left home for the street:

*I left home because my step-mom is mistreats me (\*wa nsotla). When...dad goes to work, she...beats me...but treats her...(own)...child ...(a half-sibling)...well. We are not really getting along with my step-mom. When I sleep at home, she...threatens to poison my food...(silence with head looking down). She doesn't give me anything, she would say she does not have money.*

There was sadness in the child's tone and demeanour. The stepmom who is 39-years old, had a different story: not understanding why her stepson left home:

*He would come home and just sit outside the house unless I...call him inside to come bath...(then)...he came. After bathing, he asks for money, I give him and then he would leave. I would see him again maybe after a month...So, I really don't understand the reason why he went to the street, as everything is just fine at home, he gets everything.*

This stepmother's narration revealed that the child was neither free nor comfortable at home, so he stays outside. It's unreal that the stepmother takes it as if it is normal for the child not be at home for long periods. More fundamentally, the child relays the beating and threats to poison his food when he does sleep at home. He complains that she doesn't give him anything. Trust issues abound in this dire situation yet there has been no intervention, in a highly unethical, illegal and unbearable situation. Ward and Seager (2010: 85-100) also report boys describing unpleasant relationships with stepparents. The researcher observed at the interview done at the home of the stepmother, the neat home and family situation, not reflecting any financial challenges. Yet serious problems continue between stepmother and stepson. The former most likely is dishonest about how she contributes to the child's behaviour of going to the street. The biological father was unavailable at the time of the interview.

The parents asserts that the child gets everything, that is, material things. However, the child's search is not for material things when poverty is not the household problem. Saha (2001: 21-31) cites Durkheim, who argued that moral behaviour required attachment (or belonging) to a social group. For this child, street life may mean exposure to a negative moral compass, but he gains an identity and belonging with his peers, that is missing at home. This is also true of children under the care of centres and their managers. Stepping into the streets gives him peace away from home conflicts. There is a dyadic closure affected by the mother in not revealing her real relation and role in the child's behaviour.

One fifteen-year-old female stepchild blamed her stepfather's mistreatment that led her to turn to the street: *The reason why I am on the street and left home is that I don't like living with my stepdad. He is not treating me well, but he is treating his other biological daughter well.*

The stepfather, aged 41, does not understand why his stepdaughter lives on the street as she is treated well and gets everything at home. The narratives are polarized. However, the stepdad asked the child why she turned to the street, and believes that the child is uncontrollable when she is with her friends. The stepfather is working and says he provides for all the child's needs, and thus cannot make sense of her turning to the street. Noteworthy here is that 'everything' remains material for the parent, while for the child its more than that. Sociologically, meaning is at stake here, of the adult world of discipline and the child's view of 'everything' relating to playing and interaction with peers outside of the family house.

Furthermore, the polarised nature of the relationship of stepfather and stepchild, remains unresolved, as the child claims her needs are not being met in an environment of harsh discipline. Unfortunately, the biological mother of the child was not around to be interviewed. Since the interview was done at the home, the researcher observed no financial struggles or anything visibly specific or poverty-related that would lead the child to the street. However, the child's mistreatment by the stepdad was seen to be negative that led the child to say she would rather stay with her biological mother.

These stepfamilies' experiences correspond to Amato's (2005: 75-96) findings that changing to a stepfamily can affect a child's development. Ganong and Coleman (2012) found that children tend to like living in single-parent families with their mothers. They have her undivided attention. When she begins dating or she remarries, her attention is divided between her children and the new partner. Children may therefore, resent the new partner or stepfather, who may have no clue about why he is a target for his stepchildren's ire. Cartwright and Moore (2012) and Stoll et al., (2006: 177-189) also found inconsistent acceptance of stepparents, as it may undermine the biological parent-child relationship. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) state that a conservative viewpoint on family transition suggests that stepfamilies have negative impacts on children. Family dyads and triads thus may be playing off each other in such scenarios, as multiple dynamics of both types of relations are also interactive.

### ***Sense of belonging and identity:***

From such stepfamilies, children turning to the street may reflect another sociological tendency: to seek for a sense of belonging (Durkheim), in the face of a negative identity of their stepparents' mistreatment at home. The above stepfamilies of street children are not financial stress, and the two children above may be on the street to find a sense of belonging outside of their stepfamilies, in social groups on the street and at Drop-in centres. The solution is to indulge in other more useful non-material dyads and triads. The identity sought by these children is not necessarily about economic and material aspects. Its more to venture outside the physical trappings of parentally conceived physical needs, for the children still complained that they



do not get everything they want from the parents. The parents may be enforcing their views on the children on the meaning of 'getting everything,' which to the children means other things. Inevitably, this results in no common shared meaning of what it means to have everything. Social meanings are central to social existence and their variation may be the nub of the problem, and solutions need to take this into account.

Saha (2001: 21-31) expands on this, when he cited Durkheim's belief that moral behaviour could not be coerced or forced behaviour, viz., individuals must freely choose to behave in a manner which reflects obligation and responsibility towards society. To act morally is to act in terms of the collective interest. Because of actor autonomy in moral behaviour, Durkheim believed every society had to generate its own set of moral norms and rules of behaviour, and had to instil into individuals the motivation to act morally (Saha, 2001: 21-31). In South Africa, with its rife crime and political corruption, the street may not be the right place to develop moral behaviour. Yet the child prefers the risky choice even if to offset his more secure home environment.

One eighteen (18)-year-old male from stepfamily explains:

*When my dad was alive, I was staying with him and my mother, life was fine. After my dad passed, I stayed with my mom only, and things were fine. My mom loved me, and she never used to be rude to me. Then since my stepfather came to live with us in our house, things changed. Even my mother changed. She no longer loves me. Her and my step-dad have a daughter who is my half-sister. My half-sister is the only one who is loved and treated better.*

*My relationship with my mom and stepdad is not fine because my mom always listens to my stepdad and not to me. My stepdad once beat me. My mom was not around, but I did tell her that my stepdad had beaten me. When she asks my step-dad why he had beaten me, my step-dad just said I was misbehaving and disrespecting him. After that, my mom just said that I should no longer disrespect my step-dad and that I should respect him just like I was respecting my biological dad and accept him as my father.*

Such behaviour reflects triad/dyad combinations, of a biological family which transforms into shifting and dysfunctional dyad/triad relationships. The biological mother-son dyad lasted positively, until the stepfather stepped in. The mother-child dyad changed due to an emerging complex triad relationship with a sense of dispossession, discomfort and of a sense of isolation.

But finances cannot always be ruled out<sup>2</sup>: financial initiatives do exist on the part of the child, whether for stepchildren or non-stepchildren. One sixteen (16)-year-old child from a step-family stated:

*I...ask for money...(on the street). My stepmom does not do anything for me, She always says she doesn't have money...(for me). I...(don't go)...to her when I want something. I just ask my father. I stopped...school because my stepmom...(stopped) paying for my school trips, but she was paying for my half-sister. I never went to any school trip, every time when I tell her that there is a trip, she would say she don't have money and that I will go on the next trip, but when the next trip comes, she would not pay for me again.*

The outsider role of stepchildren also impinges on the stepchild's existence:

*...(Sometimes)...father gives me money, but sometimes he...(tells)...me to talk to...stepmom...(who)...buys us clothes...sometimes she buys clothes for her children, but...(not)...for me. She bought my half siblings...Christmas and New Year clothes... (which she promised me) ...but she didn't. I had to repeat the Christmas clothes again in New Year.*

This stepmother, fifty (50)-years old, is a stepmom to a sixteen (16)-year-old child said:

*Every time we ask my stepdaughter why she is on the street, she...says it's because I don't treat her well...(but)...I take her as my biological daughter because she is my husband's daughter. I love her father, so I love her to...My stepdaughter compares herself to...(my young kids...saying I don't treat her like them, I really try. I take care of everything...groceries and everything...(on payday). I make sure I buy clothes for all...winter...and Christmas clothes. My step-daughter would say I only buy enough clothes for my children and not buy her.*

The mother loves the stepdaughter through the father which is not a direct one-on-one relation which the child wants. It's a dyad within a triadic relationship, and the dyad of mother-step- daughter is somewhat blocked. Bildtgård et al., (2021) use Simmel's dyads and triads (1908): where biological parents mediate relationships, directly influencing its development, without which the step-dyad relation cannot exist: it means biological parents connects and brings two step-persons together, to give the step-relation a qualitatively different form. Here a direct dyadic link exists between parent and child regardless of biological parental relation, and where this relationship is regulated and supported by the law (Bildtgård et al. 2021).

Baxter, et al., (2006) point to researcher's primary focus is on dyads: stepparent-stepchild dyads, marital dyads or residential parent-child dyads. What is absent in the literature, is systems-oriented research that

weaves three dyadic subsystems into a more complex triadic framework. Such subsystems in step-families need to be explored further (Baxter, et al. (2006).

For the purposes of this paper, challenges faced by stepfamilies in the preceding findings are aligned to the literature on stepfamilies and by Attachment theory, as discussed here below.

#### ***Attachment theory and stepfamily:***

Hazan and Shaver (1992) justify Bowlby's (1979) support for Attachment theory to the development, maintenance and dissolution of attachments, with a dynamic of developing stepfamilies of destroyed past ties (biological parents), sustained existing bonds (biological parents and children), and of new ties created (remarried partners). Adjustment to change and loss in families affects children's behaviors and needs (Lewis et al., 2000: 1031-1060). Attachment insecurity usually sees increasing distance from parents, as stepparents are not always welcomed by children. Biological relations are threatened by step relations. (Stoll et al. 2006: 177-189). Baxter et al., (2004) and Cartwright (2008) cite children experiencing loss of attention or loyalty from parents as focus fell on new couple relationships.

'Complex families' see adults with children from past relationships, with own unique dynamics in remarried families, that challenges children, stepparents or couples (Dupuis, 2007; Papernow, 1987).

'Hetherington and Kelly (2002, p. 66-92) and Weaver and Coleman (2005) note that how stepchildren behave can significantly affect stepchild/stepparent reactions, both for the latter's quality and for that of remarriage experiences. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) cite scholars and stepfamily therapists concluding that adapting to the stepparent role is dissimilar to a biological parent role. In non-divorced families, authoritative but warm parenting, and moderate but responsive discipline yields positive child adjustment. For De'Aths' (1992), issues of control and discipline are conflict ridden around stepparent/child relations. Lack of blood relations mean parents cannot demand. Stepfamily therapists (Browning & Artlett, 2012; Papernow, 2006) emphasize the acquaintance time needed with stepchildren before assuming a parenting role, especially in relation to discipline issues. Shafer and Pace, (2015, p. 115-125) find that parent and stepparent support potentially lowers stress on stepchildren.

In one case the family structure of a 38-year-old female stepmother to an 18-year-old male child, financial struggles are evident. The child cited poverty as his main reason to leave home and roam the streets. However, the single/stepmother did not really cite poverty as the reason her stepson turned to the streets. She simply said she made sure that she took care of her children and ensured that they are not starving:

*They don't listen to me. I always talk to them to quit street life. I am a single parent, taking care of my children alone (\*ke tlhokomela bana baka kele one).*

Both her children roam the streets, the mother admitted. She tries, but fails, to get them off the street and from sniffing glue. Only one child who benefits from Drop-in center service, fitted into the sample's inclusion criteria (of age). This family structure is both single parent and stepfamily based: he lives with his stepmom after his biological dad passed on. Contrary to the Attachment literature and cases discussed earlier, a healthy stepmother/child relationship prevails, with no negative comments coming from either side.

*The way I treat my children is the same way I treat my stepson to make sure that they get the same care. I am trying by all means to take care of him too.*

Furstenburg (1987) found that not all stepfamilies are an indeterminable struggle or worse off than first marriage families (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994). The above case proves this. One advantage of stepfamilies is the experience is to gain extra siblings (McGee, 2012). In the above family, the child gained a mother and siblings when both biological parents passed on.

The stepfamily is a common family type in South Africa but sees little analysis in the literature. It needs more exploration as a structural feature of families, for its negative and positive connotations.

#### ***Durkheim and anomie of the division of labour:***

Based on the above discussions, most children from such stepfamilies (bar one family mentioned) feel alienated at home due to mistreatment or unequal treatment they perceive. IT seems these children leave home for the street when exposed to negative stepfamily conditions. This reflects complexities of children living and working on the streets. Essentially, such children escape mistreatment and no support, and avoid under-supervision or 'normlessness' as a deregulative notion, to reconstruct themselves on the street as much as the can.

Serpa and Ferreira (2018) thus view society's division of labour as anomic, when individuals do not abide by the rules imposed by society. But societies are also organised such that they do not have the power to

impose rules on individuals to ensure social harmony. Such an anomie has two components, of egoism and anomie (Durkheim). The former sees individuals drawing not from an external authority, but from the individual's own disposition and from one's own rules of life. S/he finds it more difficult to find existential meaning due to feeling less supported by the community. The non-egoistic individual abides by values that go beyond his/her own personality. Anomie would characterize social situations where the individual's desires can be manifested freely without being bound by rules (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018).

Children living and working on the streets may be seen to break the societal social order of the traditional family structure, but their choices bring social change and for ways to survive on the street. In not abiding to societal rules, such rules cannot be imposed on them. Durkheim's notion of 'moral behaviour cannot be coerced' rings true. Such children living and working on the streets can be considered egoistic, for their conduct and choice to be the street is an individual choice and goal rather than from societal rules.

The stepfamily structure, in the sample collated, was second to the single parent family (33%). Single-parent and stepfamily structures are faced with various unique dynamics and challenges. Sorre & Oino (2013, p. 148-155) report a growing rate of divorce in East Africa, especially in Nairobi, resulting in children suffering and who find an alternative livelihood on the streets. Stats SA (2021) reports a drop in marriages in Africa decreased, and an increase in divorces increased by 13, 1% since 2020, with 18 208 divorces granted in 2021.

Children living and working on the streets generally come from homes headed by single mothers. Most single parent families and stepfamilies result from divorce or death of one biological parent due to various reasons (e.g., HIV-AIDS, COVID-19 or Tuberculosis that is the leading cause of death in SA for STATSSA, 2021). In sum, single parent families emerge out of death of one partner or divorce. The single parent may enter into a new relationship, with partners that has his/her own children from previous relation(s). The result is a stepfamily structure that has its own unique challenges as outlined in Attachment theory literature.

Fewer children in this studies sample are from extended families (14%) and nuclear families (13%). The literature portrays the nuclear family structure as an ideal family structure for positive child upbringing or child development. However, despite fewer children who are from such family structures, Mohapanele's (2023) study revealed some dysfunctions or challenges in nuclear family structures which led children to end up on the street.

The findings of this study also reveal that within a certain family structure, other family structures do co-exist for co-interaction of structures therein. For example, one child lives with his stepmother and siblings only. Both his biological mother and dad passed on, making the child an orphan. So, this stepfamily structure in this case is considered as a single parent family structure. This is because the step-mother to the child is taking on both a role of a step-mother to the child, and she is also a single-parent in the family. The case of another child lives with both his biological mother and father, grandmother and siblings. This particular family appears to be both a nuclear family structure and an extended family structure as it consists of a grandmother too. These types of mixed families point to gaps in the literature that has been identified by this study: that the latter rarely zooms into such occurrences within family structures. It needs to be recognized as a start that certain family structures exist within other family structures, with varied functioning. Studies of families should explore such mixed or hybrid family structures and how the stepfamily fits into this, as this paper has explored.

Children provided different reasons for leaving their homes and turned to the street. Some children even stated that their family home environment is fine, as their parents treat them well. Others described their home environment as boring since their parents are not at home most of the time. Some children from stepfamilies stated that they are really uncomfortable at home as their stepparents mistreat them, and that they have a negative relationship with their stepparents. Parents also provided detailed information and reasons as to why they think their children turned to the street. Amongst other reasons that drives children to the street, some parents described their families as being poor: they stated that they are struggling financially. Some parents said that their children are uncontrollable and influenced by friends. While poverty and finance are an important factor in the reproduction of the phenomenon of children living and working on the streets, there are also other micro-layers involved as this paper has shown.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Compared to other family structures, single family and stepfamilies are faced with various unique dynamics and challenges which could impact on children, and which drives them to the street. The paper has given some instances of this, and therefore suggests that further studies should fully explore the step family as a structural feature of families, both in terms of its negative and positive connotations. Before family reunification, the analysis of families of children living and working on the streets from stepfamilies should also be done more intensively and thoroughly before reintegrating them with their parents.

The paper further proposes that children living and working on the streets should be viewed as individuals and policies should tailor to their needs and abilities. The South African government's specific family policy directions should also not be stuck in the old or outdated idealized family structures, but should align itself to contemporary emerging family structures. This research thus recommends national family and children policies should be strengthened, for family legislation to encourage parents to be exposed to social programmes and receive support from social workers. This is for there to shift behaviour in dire cases, for them to be able to learn to adapt to stepfamilies and stepchildren, and for a multi-pronged programme that involves relevant stakeholders and issues on their agendas. It is hoped that progress can be made for children working on the streets and for their families.

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This paper is an extract from a PhD study of the first author, who got supervised by the second author, both the second and third author contributed to the paper.

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No conflicts of interest

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