

# CHILD AT RISK

## THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN: WHO THEY ARE AND WHY THEY ARE AT RISK



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES  
INTERNATIONAL

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# VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN

Children are considered to be a vulnerable group in society. This is recognised through special protection and care under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. A child is recognised to be anyone 18 years old or younger.

Children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care are more critically vulnerable, as they have lost, or are at risk of losing, those people who are primarily responsible for making decisions on their behalf, guaranteeing their safety, and supporting their development towards adulthood. This places them at a higher risk of experiencing child rights violations.

Nevertheless, children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care can find themselves in very different situations, some of which are described in the next pages.

At SOS Children’s Villages, we focus on supporting those children who lack a stable or caring family environment and who are living in particularly vulnerable circumstances.

Based on conservative calculations, described in the next pages, we estimate that at least 1-in-10 children of the 2.2 billion children worldwide fall within this group.

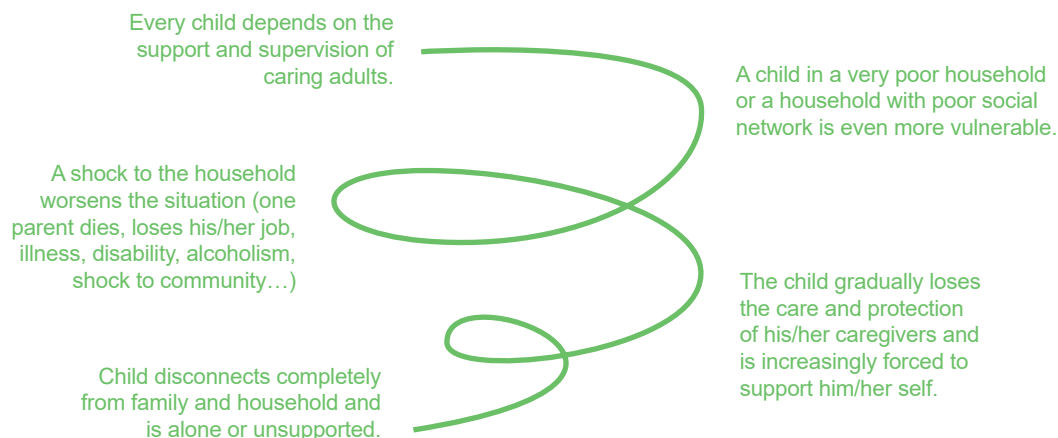
## The Downward Spiral of Child Vulnerability

Child vulnerability is a downward spiral where each shock leads to a new level of vulnerability, and each new level opens up a host of new risks. In other words, the probability of a child experiencing a negative outcome rises with each shock. At the bottom of this spiral we find children who live outside of family care or in situations of severe family abuse and neglect.

Source: [info.worldbank.org](http://info.worldbank.org)

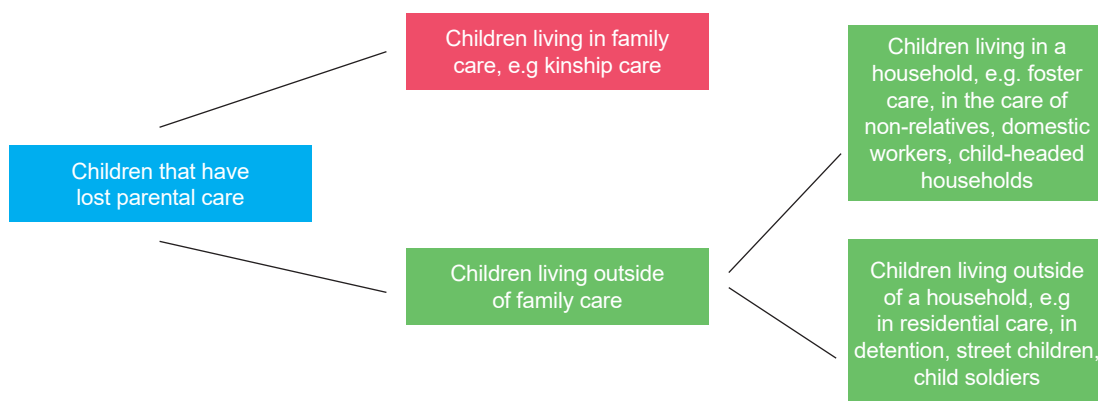


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A child in a very poor household or a household with poor social network is even more vulnerable.

## DIFFERENT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE LOST PARENTAL CARE<sup>1</sup>



When determining whether a child is extremely vulnerable, there are several ‘vulnerability markers’ which can be an important indication of the precariousness of their situation. These are:

### PARENTAL DEATH OR POOR HEALTH:

Death or poor health can prevent caregivers from being able to care for their children. However, research shows that only a very small proportion of children living outside of parental care actually do so as a result of the death of parents.

### LIVING AND CARE ARRANGEMENTS:

A more significant vulnerability marker, which is more closely associated with key health and social outcomes than whether a child’s parents are still alive, is what kind of living and care arrangement the child has. (Martin & Zulaika, 2016).

Children who are not living with their parents may still be in family care. In fact, the vast majority (84%) of children living outside of parental care are actually still living within their extended family, in kinship care (Martin & Zulaika, 2016). Furthermore, those who are living outside of (extended) family care may still be living in a household.

A child is defined by the UNCRC as anyone 18 years old or younger. The situation in which children without parental care live can therefore vary greatly. They may live in kinship care with aunts, uncles or grandparents, in child-headed households, in community care, in foster families, residential facilities or institutions; they may be child workers or street children; they may be on the move, soldiers in armed forces or militias, in marriages or young mothers, amongst victims of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, or in organised crime networks.<sup>2</sup>

This also means that the situations of children without parental care can vary from children who are in situations where they are actually well taken care of, to those who are living in extremely vulnerable circumstances.

Nevertheless, despite the varying living arrangements and levels of vulnerability, research (UNICEF, 2014) has shown that children who are not living in parental care are more likely to have worse social and health outcomes than those who live in parental care. Whether this is the case also depends on some of the following vulnerability markers (Lang-Holmen, 2016):

1 Martin, Florence S., and Garazi Zulaika. “Who Cares for Children? A Descriptive Study of Care-Related Data Available Through Global Household Surveys and How These Could Be Better Mined to Inform Policies and Services to Strengthen Family Care.” *Global Social Welfare* 3.2 (2016): 51-74.  
 2 Lang-Holmen, Pia. In *The Blindspot*. SOS Children’s Villages Norway, 2016.

## POVERTY:

It is dangerous for children when poverty leads to a situation where the parental caregivers can no longer provide adequate care, and/or families break down as a result of, for example, migration for employment opportunities.

## CULTURAL FACTORS:

The cultural context and personal relationships are important influencing factors determining the level of vulnerability of a child within a family. This can include factors such as single parenthood, divorce and remarriage, the presence of many children in the household, early or unplanned parenthood, low education levels of parents, lack of parenting skills, lack of support from the extended family, being stigmatised, discriminated against or excluded for any number of reasons, such as being part of a minority. Also the inability of parents to care for a sick child or a child with a disability can place stress on the family structure and lead to possible separation.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS:

These factors include issues such as substance abuse, violence, physical and mental abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation and neglect.

## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS:

At a household level these factors are about how families react to and cope with political and economic stress. Also, the availability and their access to governmental structures and support services are factors contributing to the household's level of vulnerability.

All these vulnerability markers are relevant where they lead to situations in which parental caregivers struggle to provide their children with adequate care. This may lead to the child's rights not being met or – at the extreme – being violated, or the family breaking down.



## CONTEXTUAL AND FAMILY RISK FACTORS

'Common for our target group is that they are deprived of or risk to be deprived of the most important structure of development and the most basic of children's rights, a nurturing family.'

*In the Blindspot*  
Lang-Holmen, 2016



Children without parental care are often thought of as orphans. However, the reality is that most children who are living without their parents have at least one parent who is still alive. According to a recent study, based on national household survey data from 77 countries, 'true orphanhood' (where both parents are dead) is a relatively rare occurrence, with the vast majority of the countries having a prevalence of less than 1% (Martin & Zulaika, 2016). On the other hand, it was found that on average 10% of children are living with neither biological parent. As such, orphanhood is not the major driver for children living without parental care.

In most cases, loss of parental care, or the risk thereof, results from a combination of factors, although some may be more prominent than others. Such factors vary from one community setting to another and can change over time.

Children are more likely to be at risk of losing parental care when they live in regions, countries or communities where there are **contextual factors** such as health epidemics<sup>1</sup>, armed conflict, violence and internal displacement, high levels of unemployment, economic crises and/or stagnating or unequal economic growth, political instability, natural disasters, harmful cultural beliefs and practices, gender discrimination and when families lack a strong social support network.

Also, certain dynamics within the family can create a particular situation which can contribute to the risk of losing parental care. **Family characteristics** and dynamics are influenced by contextual factors.

*Family characteristics* refer to the specifics which determine the type of family setting in which a child lives. This is about who makes up the household (for example young, old, educated, number of children), and the composition of the household (for example single parent, extended family).

*Family dynamics* refer to the interactions and relationships that can exist between the different household members.

Vulnerable children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care most often come from families which, as a result of a combination of factors, lack the resilience to manage risks and shocks, and are less aware, less able or sometimes even less willing to adequately protect and care for their children.





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## THE CHILD WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE

For SOS Children's Villages, children who are considered to *have lost parental care*, are those children who do not live with either of their biological parents, because their parents are either unable or unwilling to adequately care for them.<sup>2</sup>

Children can lose the care of their parents as a result of any of the following circumstances:

### The parents pass away

#### The parents and children are separated due to family dynamics, such as:

- ➔ Children are abandoned by their parents;
- ➔ Children run away from their parents; and
- ➔ State authorities remove the child from their family, which can be necessary when it is in the best interests of the child due to reasons of neglect or abuse.

#### The parents and children are separated due to contextual factors, such as:

- ➔ Children leave the family home for economic or socio-cultural reasons;
- ➔ Children are separated from their parents due to political or environmental circumstances; and
- ➔ Parents leave the family home for economic opportunities.

## THE CHILD AT RISK OF LOSING PARENTAL CARE

Children are viewed as being *at risk of losing parental care* when they live in a situation where there is a high probability and risk of any of the above happening. In such situations children may live in a household together with one or both parent(s), but their basic material, emotional, health and educational needs are being neglected or they are abused, because the parents lack either the capacity or the commitment to adequately care for and protect them. Children then lack quality parental care, even though parent(s) may be physically present, which may lead to a situation where children are separated from their parent(s).

1 For example, the HIV pandemic in especially Sub-Saharan Africa.

2 In the *UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, children without parental care are those children who have lost the care of one or both parents. As the type of response for children with no parents in comparison to those with still one parent present may be quite different, SOS Children's Villages distinguishes between those who have lost all parental care, and those at risk of losing parental care, where having only one parent puts a child at greater risk than children living with both parents.

3 As mentioned above, children living in households in certain contexts or with certain characteristics will be more likely to be at risk than others.

## FINDING THE CHILD AT RISK IN THE STATISTICS

More than seven billion people live in the world today, including 2.2 billion children (defined by the UNCRC as anyone 18 years old or younger). SOS Children's Villages estimates that approximately 10% of the world's children are growing up without appropriate parental care. This is a staggering 220 million children. This figure includes those children who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care, and live in extremely vulnerable circumstances where they are lacking adequate care and protection.



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**However, important to note is that no precise statistical data exists on children without parental care and those at risk of losing it. The very nature of these children's lives can make it difficult to find statistical information about them. For instance:**

- ➔ Many of these children live in countries where systems are weak for children in general, let alone these most vulnerable children;
- ➔ There is a lack of statistics specifically counting children who have lost parental care or risk losing it. This means that we often need to use other indicators as sources of information. However, given the fact that there are different vulnerability markers that intersect, counting these different vulnerability markers separately may well mean counting the same children more than once;
- ➔ Although existing household surveys<sup>1</sup> can contain relevant information, this information is not analysed or disaggregated, and therefore is not portrayed in the national reports (Martin and Zulaika, 2016); and
- ➔ Much information is gathered through household surveys. This means that those children who are not part of a household are not counted. The same applies for alternative care facilities. If not registered, the children in these facilities are not counted.

**Without disaggregated data, the best we can do today is estimate, based on the figures that are in the public domain, keeping in mind that:**

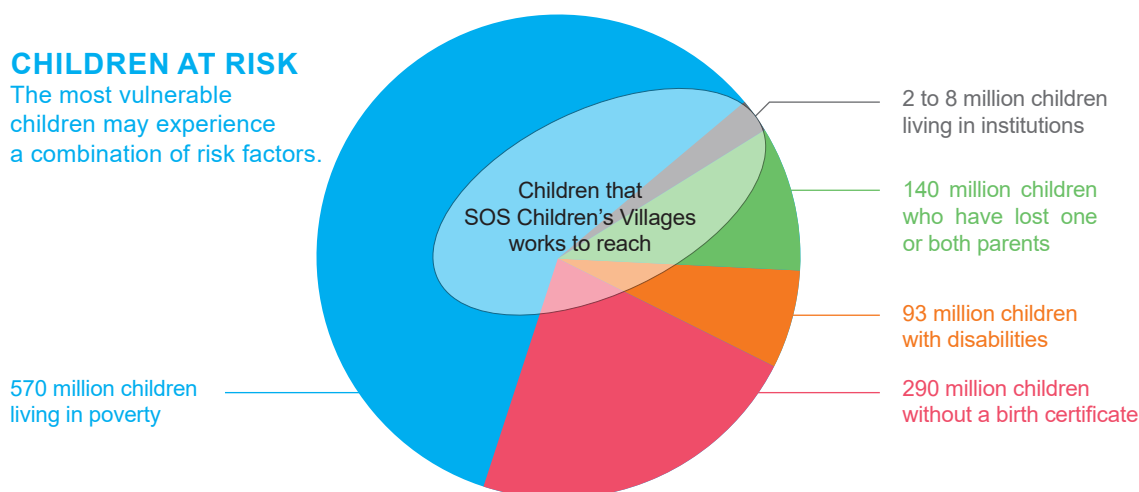
- ➔ Some children are not counted;
- ➔ Some children are counted more than once;
- ➔ No indicator will exactly fit every child at risk.

<sup>1</sup> Such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) with support from Measure DHS and USAID, and Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys (MICS), with support from UNICEF.



## CHILDREN AT RISK

The most vulnerable children may experience a combination of risk factors.



➔ **140 million children worldwide have lost one or both parents**, of which at least 13 million have lost both parents<sup>1</sup>. Of these children, the vast majority are living with their surviving parent or with extended family members (Better Care Network, 2009).

➔ **1-in-10 children are not living with either of their biological parents<sup>2</sup>**: These children only partially overlap with the children in the first group. The vast majority of these children have one and even both parents still living (Martin & Zulaika, 2016).

➔ **570 million children live in extreme poverty<sup>3</sup>**: Poverty is considered to be one of the main vulnerability markers for children of our target group. Poverty in itself is the result of a multitude of factors, as listed above, ranging from political instability, war, discrimination and stigmatisation to household characteristics, such as unemployment, poor health and lack of education. Poverty can lead to child rights violations, such as hunger, child labour, lack of education, and are stress factors in the household, which can cause violence. While this is a reality, poverty alone is never considered to be an acceptable reason for children to be placed into alternative care.

➔ **2 to 8 million children live in institutions**: The exact number of residential institutions and the number of children living in them is unknown. Estimates range from ‘more than

2 million<sup>4</sup>’ to 8 million<sup>5</sup>. However, the actual number is likely to be far higher due to a lack of data from many countries, and the fact that many institutions are not registered.

➔ **290 million children do not possess a birth certificate (UNICEF, 2015)**: Characteristics of children without a birth certificate overlap with those at risk of losing parental care.

➔ **93 million children live with disabilities**: Children with disabilities are more likely to lose parental care and to be placed in alternative care.

Taking into account the overlap between groups, the combination of factors which cause children to be at risk, and that no single statistic fully represents all children at risk, SOS Children’s Villages estimates that there are around 220 million children who need the kind of help we provide. Given the limitations of statistical information, both in availability of indicators, and reliability of capturing all children, this is likely to be a conservative estimation.

1 UNICEF, State of the World’s Children, 2016

2 Martin & Zulaika, 2016. Based on research done in 77 countries.

3 UNICEF, A post 2015 world fit for children

4 UNICEF, Progress for Children:

A Report Card on Child Protection Number 8, 2009

5 Pinheiro, P., World Report on Violence against Children, UNICEF, New York, 2006

## THE CHILDREN WHO NEED US

SOS Children’s Villages supports those children who have lost or who are at risk of losing parental care and who are living in extremely vulnerable circumstances.

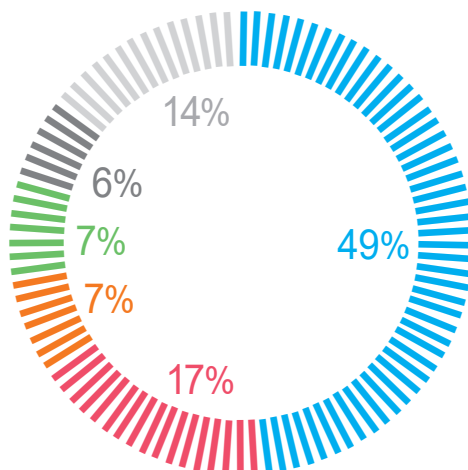
We do this through a range of different interventions, depending on the individual needs of the child and the local context. These interventions may range from counselling and material support for struggling families, daycare, education access for children and young people, access to vocational training for parents and young people, and when necessary for the child, through alternative care in an SOS family, a foster family or another family-like environment, depending on the best interests of the child.

We focus first on family strengthening, to support families at risk of breaking down and prevent the need for alternative care in the first place.



**In 2015, more than 56,000 children and young people were newly admitted to SOS family strengthening programmes. For most of these families, the primary reason for enrolment was poverty.**

### PRIMARY REASONS CHILDREN WERE ADMITTED TO SOS FAMILY STRENGTHENING IN 2015:



- 49% poverty
- 17% death of a parent
- 7% family with many children
- 7% instability of parents' relationship
- 6% parent in poor health
- 14% other factors (for example: abuse, displaced or refugee status, endangerment because of minority status, etc.)



**At time of enrolment in SOS family strengthening in 2015, the children's health, education and well-being were at risk in a range of different ways:**

**36%** of school-aged children were behind for their age in school, and 6% were not even enrolled.

**29%** of the families risked eviction or forced relocation from their living situation

**28%** of the families could not afford to feed their children enough meals per day

**16%** of the families had no income at all to provide for their children

**10%** of the children were malnourished

**9%** of the families were homeless

Statistics from over 56,000 child participants, from 99 countries, enrolled in SOS family strengthening in 2015. Source: SOS Children's Villages Programme Database, 2016.

Based on the conservative calculations outlined in this report, we estimate that at least 1-in-10 children of the 2.2 billion children worldwide fall within this group of vulnerable children in need of the kind of support that we provide.

Children without  
or at risk of losing  
parental care

and

...who are living  
in extremely  
vulnerable  
circumstances

= **1-in-10 children**

# A LOVING HOME FOR EVERY CHILD



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