

NUMBER OF AIDS ORPHANS DROPS – REPORT

By Agnes Kyotalengerire

The number of children who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS in Rakai and the neighbouring districts has reduced sharply over the last three decades, a new report has revealed.

Findings from a Ugandan study by the Rakai Health Sciences Programme dubbed *Incidence and Prevalence of Orphanhood in Rakai, Uganda*, revealed a steep drop in the number of orphaned children from 21.5% (3,421 out of 15,941 children) in the 2003-2004 period to 6.3% (1,449 of 23,082 individuals) in 2022.

Among orphaned adolescents aged 15 and 17, the reduction was even bigger. In 2002-2003, 49% (1,057 out of 2,138 children) had lost at least one parent. By 2020-22, the figure had dropped to 14.4% (526 out of 3,661).

Notably, the number of new orphans also declined sharply; double orphanhood declined from 5.13% in the 2003-2004 period to 0.68% in 2020-2022.

The proportion of new cases of paternal orphanhood attributed to HIV declined from 67% in 2004 to 11% in 2022, while on the maternal side, it was from 71% to 12%.

REASON FOR REDUCTION

Dr Robert Ssekubugu, a public health researcher at Rakai Health Sciences Programme, attributed the decline to availability antiretroviral therapy (ART) in the management of HIV/AIDS.

He added that due to ART treatment availability, parents with the virus are living longer and taking care of their children.

“The share of orphanhood linked to parental HIV infection fell dramatically over time,” Ssekubugu said.

Apart from living longer, ART treatment ensures that an HIV positive parent suppresses the viral load,

NATIONAL TREND

The Rakai Health Sciences Programme findings come less than a month after a Uganda Bureau of Statistics report indicated a general decline in the number of orphans. According to the report released on March 19, orphans now make up 12.9% of the population, down from 13.2% in 2002.

The report, titled *Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Monograph 2024*, was unveiled during a dissemination workshop at Uganda Bureau of Statistics headquarters in Kampala.

Findings show that the Madi sub-region, comprising Moyo,

Adjumani and Obongi, has the highest prevalence at 20.1% (about one in five children), followed by Karamoja at 19.3% and West Nile at 18.3%. Kampala and Teso recorded the lowest rates at 9.3% and 9.5%, respectively.

The report also highlights gaps in education and employment among orphans.

“Three in every 10 orphans aged three to five years are attending school, and slightly over half of those aged six to 17 are in school,” it notes.

About 20% of orphans aged five to 17 are engaged in work.

Nearly 1% of children (0.7%) – equivalent to about 192,000 – do not know the survival status of their parents.

hence preventing the infection of their partner (mother or father of the children).

To consolidate the gains, sustained investment and adaptation of HIV programmes are crucial to mitigate the ongoing risk of orphanhood arising from HIV, Ssekubungu noted.

Approximately 800,000 of Uganda’s 1.6 to 2 million orphans are estimated to be affected by HIV/AIDS, with the disease accounting for roughly 43% of child orphanhood. These children face severe,

long-term consequences, including psychological distress (anxiety and depression), poverty, educational disruption and increased vulnerability to abuse or neglect, especially in child-headed households.

For Uganda, especially communities such as Rakai



Kyotera district health officer Muwanga and public health researcher Ssekubugu

that were once at the epicentre of the epidemic, these findings matter deeply. They confirm what many families already know from lived experience: HIV treatment is not just about saving individuals; it is about keeping families together and giving children a fair chance at life.

Sarah Nakalembe, a community leader in Lyantonde district, agrees with the new findings.

“Parents who are HIV positive and have taken their medication religiously have managed to see their children grow up, get educated and live productive lives,” she says.

Nakalembe says Rakai and the surrounding districts, including Lyantonde, lost many people to HIV in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to a spike in orphans.

“However, the number of people dying started reducing gradually after the Government introduced antiretroviral treatment in early 2000s. We embarked on encouraging people to take their medicines while ensuring healthy diets and good lifestyle habits. As a result, people started living longer,” she says.

Notably, through patient support groups, individuals battling stigma and cannot go to health facilities to get their refills are able to have their medicine delivered to them by peers in the same community.

The HIV prevalence in Lyantonde district currently stands at 7.9%, higher than the national figure of 4.9%. By December 2024, about 6,400 people were living with HIV and of these, only 83.1% were on treatment.

Moses Mayombwe, a peer educator at Kasensero Health Centre II in Kyotera district, said unlike in the past where people living with HIV were discriminated against, lately those infected with the virus are taken care of well and also equipped with

livelihood skills. This, according to Mayombwe, has enabled them earn income to take care of themselves and their children.

Mayombwe commended the government efforts, noting that availability of ARVs coupled with sensitisation on the importance of adherence to medication has enabled HIV-positive couples suppress the virus and not infect babies.

“We no longer see people die of HIV or babies born infected with HIV,” he notes.

Kyotera district health officer Dr Edward Muwanga confirmed that more people living with HIV in the district are on treatment (ARVs) compared to the past, hence living longer.

The 2025 National HIV Survey estimates reveals that in 2024, Kyotera recorded an HIV prevalence of 12.6% second to Kabarole district with a 14%. In the same year, a total of 19,380 people (85.0%) out of the 22,800 who were living with HIV in Kyotera district were on treatment.

HIV TRENDS

Uganda has made significant progress in the HIV fight. Prevalence has dropped to 4.9% from 18% in the 1980s and 1990s.

Approximately 1.5 million people are living with HIV in Uganda and 1.3 million of these are on treatment. New infections fell from 94,000 in 2010 to 37,000 in 2024, while AIDS-related deaths declined from 54,000 to 20,000 in the same period. However, women remain disproportionately affected, forming the bulk of infections, while men face higher treatment gaps and mortality.

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