

## Article

# The Behavioral and Emotional Impact of Growing Up Without Parents Among Adolescents in Conflict with the Law in a Secure Care Center in the Limpopo Province, South Africa

Esther Shuma <sup>1,\*</sup>, Josephine Mudau <sup>1</sup>, Kingsley Amaechi <sup>1</sup>, Winter Mokhelepa <sup>2</sup> and Olivia Sumbane <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Youth Development, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Venda, Private Bag X5050, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa; thizwilondi.mudau@univen.ac.za (J.M.); kingsley101amaechi@gmail.com (K.A.)

<sup>2</sup> School of Medicine, Faculty of Health Science, University of Limpopo, Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, Polokwane 0727, South Africa; 201826851@myturf.ul.ac.za (W.M.); gsakani.sumbane@ul.ac.za (O.S.)

\* Correspondence: esther.shuma@univen.ac.za; Tel: +27-15-962-9458

## Abstract

Growing up without parental care may negatively affect adolescents' behavioral and emotional development, particularly among adolescents in conflict with the law. In a selected secure care center in the Vhembe District, limited research has explored the lived experiences and behavioral impact of growing up without parents. This study aimed to explore and describe the behavioral and emotional impact of growing up without parents among adolescents in conflict with the law in a child and adolescent secure care center in Limpopo Province. A qualitative, explorative, descriptive, and contextual research design was employed. Purposive sampling was used to recruit twelve (12) adolescents aged 15–17 years admitted to a secure care center in the Vhembe District. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in Xitsonga or Tshivenda, depending on participants' preferred language. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed using Tesch's eight steps of data analysis. Ethical considerations and measures to ensure trustworthiness were observed throughout the study. The findings revealed that adolescents experienced low self-esteem, diminished self-confidence, early initiation of substance use, poor educational engagement, survival-oriented delinquent behavior, and feelings of neglect. These findings highlight the need for an integrated intervention approach to ensure coordinated psychosocial, educational, behavioral, and socio-economic support for this population.

**Keywords:** adolescents; behavior; conflict with law; emotional experiences; parental care; secured care center

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial stage of life characterized by changes in the body, emotions, and social connections. An adolescent's behavioral adaptations, including how they form their identity and coping mechanisms, can be particularly impacted by the presence and influence of their parents [1]. Parents often assist and encourage their children, keep an eye on and supervise their behavior, administer discipline, and make sure they are exposed to significant social interactions and relationships [2]. Unfortunately, the situation is very different for millions of adolescents around the world, roughly eight million who

are growing up without their parents [3]. This is due to loss, as their families have abandoned them due to migration, poverty, or other difficult circumstances [4]. Growing up without parents exposes adolescents to a variety of risks that may affect how they behave. Adolescents may face a variety of challenges in the absence of consistent parental care and support [5]. These include loneliness, adjusting to a lack of financial assistance, and dealing with loss and grief, all of which can impair their capacity to control and regulate their emotions and act appropriately.

Parental presence is associated with positive youth development, while parental absence is associated with adverse outcomes including mental health problems, behavioral problems, and risk-taking behaviors [6,7]. Due to a lack of social support and supervision, adolescents who grow up without parental care are more likely to engage in substance abuse, criminality, and social disengagement, according to international studies [8,9]. Similarly, research carried out in high-income settings has connected orphanhood and parental separation with greater levels of academic disengagement, substance abuse, and psychological distress when compared to peers who have parental care [10].

Research indicates that large numbers of adolescents are growing up without parents in Sub-Saharan Africa, largely due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and socioeconomic challenges [9,11]. However, these adolescents are not only vulnerable but also challenged by negative behaviors [12,13]. In Zimbabwe, studies have found that adolescent orphanhood is associated with higher levels of mental distress, including suicidal ideation and attempts [14]. Moreover, research revealed that orphaned adolescents reported higher rates of substance use and sexual risk behaviors compared to their non-orphaned counterparts [15,16]. Yet, there are adolescents who have experienced loss of caregivers yet adapt in positive ways, such as South African orphaned learners who exhibit protective behaviors in the face of challenges like poverty and find ways to maintain a positive self-concept and hold onto life aspirations [17].

For adolescents living in South Africa, especially in rural areas such as Limpopo, not living with their parents is often inextricably linked to broader structural constraints and multiple forms of stress [8,18]. While some youth in the more affluent provinces, such as Limpopo and Gauteng, are completing their senior secondary school education and entering various transitions of life away from home, the journey is replete with both joy and challenges [19,20]. From a qualitative perspective, youth who have lost one or both parents experience considerable levels of stress, are disengaged from school and experience negative psychosocial outcomes as a result of growing up in poverty and in the absence of a supportive social network [17,21]. The high prevalence of fatherless households and experiences of parental absence in South Africa also presents multiple risks for youth, including substance use and delinquent behavior, thus necessitating family-centered and community-based interventions to support positive adaptation of adolescents [10,22].

The literature indicates that adolescents growing up without parenting are exposed to various social challenges. Generally, adolescents who have been abandoned by their parents are more likely to join gangs and other bad groups in the communities in an attempt to belong. In such groups adolescents make wrong perceptions that they are developing meaningful relationships within their society. Against this background, this study seeks to explore and describe the behavioral and emotional impact of growing up without parents among adolescents in conflict with the law in a child and adolescent secure care center in the Limpopo Province, South Africa.

### *1.1. Theoretical Framework*

This study is guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977), which explains human behavior as the result of continuous interaction between environmental influences, cognitive and emotional processes, and behavioral responses [23]. The theory em-

phasizes that learning occurs not only through direct experience but also through observation of others, imitation of behaviors, and the internalization of behavioral patterns that are reinforced within specific environments [24]. Importantly, this reciprocal process is shaped by the social context in which individuals develop.

In the context of this study, Social Cognitive Theory provides an analytical pathway for understanding how adolescents in conflict with the law, residing in a secure child and youth care center in the Vhembe District, develop behavioral and emotional patterns across different environments. The framework is applied to explain how early caregiving environments, peer systems, and institutional contexts interact to shape behavioral adaptation.

### *1.2. Environmental Processes*

The environmental dimension refers to the social and relational contexts in which adolescents develop [23]. In this study, this includes early experiences of inconsistent parental care, limited positive behavioral modeling within family systems, and later exposure to peer groups and institutional environments within the secure care center. These environments provide observable behavioral patterns that adolescents may interpret, adopt, or reject. In line with Bandura's theory, behavior is shaped by the availability and nature of models within these environments, as well as the reinforcement structures that exist within them.

### *1.3. Personal (Cognitive-Emotional) Processes*

The personal component refers to adolescents' internal cognitive and emotional processes that mediate how environmental experiences are interpreted [24]. In this study, these include feelings of neglect, emotional insecurity, and self-perceptions shaped by repeated experiences of exclusion and limited caregiving support. These internal states influence how adolescents evaluate social situations, regulate emotions, and make behavioral decisions. Within Bandura's framework, cognition does not operate independently but is shaped by environmental exposure and, in turn, influences behavioral choices.

### *1.4. Behavioral Processes*

The behavioral dimension refers to the actions and responses adopted by adolescents in interaction with their environment and internal states [25]. In this study, these behaviors include substance use, disengagement from education, and survival-oriented coping strategies. These behaviors are not viewed as isolated actions but as outcomes of continuous interaction between environmental exposure, emotional experiences, and reinforcement patterns within peer and institutional contexts. Some behaviors are maintained through perceived social acceptance, coping relief, or adaptation to environmental demands.

### *Analytical Integration*

Together, these three components form an integrated analytical pathway used in this study: environmental conditions shape cognitive and emotional processes, which in turn influence behavioral responses, while behavior is continuously reinforced or modified through ongoing interaction with the environment. This framework allows for a nuanced interpretation of how adolescents in secure care settings develop behavioral and emotional patterns over time, without reducing their experiences to deterministic outcomes. Instead, it highlights the dynamic and reciprocal nature of development within constrained social contexts.

## 2. Research Methods and Design

### 2.1. Research Design

The study used a qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design. To gain an in-depth understanding and new insight into the adolescents' behavioral adjustment experiences within the natural setting. The design was selected because there is limited information about the behavioral adjustment amongst adolescents in the absence of parental care, who conflict with the law in a secure child and youth care center in the Limpopo Province. The design enables the researcher to gain a rich and detailed description of the behavior, experiences and feelings of adolescents who are placed in a secure child and youth center. This paper will only address selected findings from a broader study.

### 2.2. Setting

The study was conducted in one of the secure child and youth care centers in the Vhembe District, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. This center provides services for adolescents and youth in conflict with the law, meaning they were admitted into the center after committing a criminal offense. During the time of the study the adolescents within the center were 55.

### 2.3. Participants

After receiving permission to collect data from the Department of Social Development and the selected institution, the researcher visited the center for the recruitment of potential candidates. The researcher informed the center manager about the nature and the objectives of the study, and he gave permission. The social worker was then assigned to assist the researcher in informing the guardians/parents of the adolescents about the study. The meeting was then arranged to inform and request permission from the guardians/parents to conduct the study using the adolescents. The parents/guardians who agreed that their adolescents could participate in the study signed a consent form. In cases where the parents/guardians were not available to give consent, the social worker gave consent.

Twelve adolescents, admitted at the selected Child and Youth Care Center in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province, were selected using a non-probability purposive sampling technique. The selected candidates were living in the absence of parental care prior to admission to the center, had a conflict with the law, and were able and willing to participate in the study. To minimize selection bias, the researcher introduces the study to all potential candidates to ensure equal opportunity to participate. Only those who met the inclusion criteria were selected. The staff members only assisted by getting the consent from the parents /guardians; the researcher recruited the eligible candidates. Recruitment continues until data saturation is reached.

### 2.4. Data Collection

Data was collected by the researcher, who had received training in qualitative data collection methods to appropriately engage with the adolescents and develop effective interview skills. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were utilized to collect in-depth data regarding the behavioral adjustment experiences of adolescents who are placed in a child and youth center following a lack of parental care and in conflict with the law. The researcher commenced the interviews with the demographic data before proceeding with the main questions to create rapport and comfort atmosphere with the adolescents. The interview guide was used to facilitate the interviews and to maintain consistency throughout the semi-structured interviews. During the interviews the researcher used the probing

skills to encourage the adolescents to elaborate their response to gain a deeper insight into their experiences.

The data was collected in a private room at the selected center to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in Xitsonga and Tshivenda as these are the languages mostly spoken in the chosen area and were preferred by the participants. The use of these two languages enhanced understanding by the adolescents and they freely expressed their experiences. The researcher was conversant with both languages which facilitated effective communication. All interviews were audio recorded to capture accurate data, and field notes were also taken to record nonverbal cues, observations and other contextual information relevant to the study.

The following interview questions were aligned with specific elements of the Bandura cognitive, social and learning framework:

Questions on environmental influences:

*Can you describe the environment in which you grew up before coming to the center?*

*How did the people around you influence your behavior while growing up?*

Question on observation and role modeling:

*Have there been people whose behavior influenced the way you act today? Please explain.*

Questions on behavioral influences:

*How does your parents' absence affect your behavior?*

*How do you feel about your parents' absence from your life?*

Interviews lasted for approximately 30–40 min, depending on the participant's response. Data collection and analysis occurred at the same time for the researcher to determine when there was no new information emerging from the interviews. Data saturation was reached during the tenth interview, and two additional interviews were conducted to verify the data saturation, after which no participant was recruited.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through the application of Tesch's eight steps of qualitative data analysis [26]. The data analysis was started immediately after data collection and conducted alongside the respective interviews for the identification of emerging themes and for the determination of data saturation. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the Xitsonga and Tshivenda interviews were translated into English. The researcher used NVivo 12 to organize, manage and code the data.

The audio-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim in the languages in which they were conducted before they could be translated into English. The researcher, who is conversant with both Xitsonga and Tshivenda as well as English, translated the interview data. Selected transcribed interviews were reviewed by the supervisor as well as an independent co-coder who is also familiar with the two languages as well as qualitative data analysis. Every effort was made to ensure the highest standards of credibility and trustworthiness of the translated data. During the translation period, care and effort were made to preserve the language-specific meaning, expression and intent of the participants' data. Any unclear phrases and/or concepts were discussed and clarified to maximize the meaning and authenticity of the data. Furthermore, field notes and observations taken during the interviews were also incorporated into the analysis process for more in-depth interpretation of the information gathered.

Then the researcher read all the transcripts carefully to get a first impression and to note down all the thoughts, ideas and interpretations that came up while reading through the data. Then one transcript was read through very carefully in detail while jotting down thoughts, ideas and interpretations in the margins of the transcript. The list of topics that emerged from the data was compiled and grouped together by similar topics by looking

at the patterns and relationships between the topics that emerged from the data of the participants.

The next step was to 'code' the data by abbreviating the above topics and writing the codes in the margin next to relevant parts of the transcripts. After re-reading the data to check for any more categories or codes that may have been missed, the above topics were grouped together into categories and subcategories to organize the information and to avoid duplication. In the next step, the researcher gave a descriptive name to each category and to the subthemes that were generated from the data to describe the participants' experiences.

The information from each category was thoroughly analyzed within itself to determine the core of the information in relation to the experiences of the participants. The supervisor reviewed the full transcripts, codes, categories and themes developed by the researcher. The independent co-coder, who has qualitative experience, reviewed the transcripts and the coding, categories and themes developed by the researcher. Where there were discrepancies between the researcher and the co-coder/supervisor, these were discussed until consensus was reached and the final themes and sub-themes developed.

The credibility of the findings was ensured by member checking and validation during and after each interview. The researcher summarized the participants' responses and requested that the participants verify the accuracy of the captured information and confirm that their views were captured correctly. Furthermore, the researchers invited the participants who were available to verify the explanation of the data and determine whether it accurately reflects their experience. This process enables adolescents to clarify and understand information. Furthermore, validation of the data was not only dependent on member checking, but it was also dependent on the prolonged engagement with the data and the involvement of an independent coder who is an expert in qualitative research data analysis, where a consensus was reached regarding the identified themes and sub-themes.

## 2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is FHSSE/232/DS/03/0602. The Department of Social Development gave permission to collect data at the selected center. In this study adolescents under the age of 18 years gave their consent through their parents/guardians or social workers. The researcher engaged with parents or guardians of the adolescents participating and got consent from them for them to participate, as the law regards them as minors and they cannot consent on their own. The assent form was signed by those who were under 18 years old. The participants and their guardians/parents were provided with detailed information about the study; this included the main aim of the study and the procedures that would be followed in the process of gathering relevant information needed for the study.

The study was conducted with a group of adolescents admitted to a selected secure Child and Youth Care center. Many adolescents in this study have experienced life in the absence of parental care, having been abandoned or orphaned and in some cases having limited contact with their biological parents. In addition to their difficult family circumstances, all adolescents in this study were also in conflict with the law and were in care under the supervision of a Child and Youth Care center. Since many of the adolescents in this study had biological parents or legal guardians who were unavailable to provide consent for participation in this study, consent for participation and access to the adolescents was provided by the appropriate authorities responsible for their care, i.e., the social worker and the management of the selected center. The social worker provided consent for the study in the best interest of the adolescents.

The study received ethical clearance from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee, which reviewed and approved the procedures concerned involving this population. In addition to the institutional consent, the adolescents were asked for assent to participate in the study after the study had been fully explained to them in a language that they could understand. All the participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. To prevent the risk of coercion, adolescents volunteered to participate in the study. The researcher clearly explained to the adolescents that their decision to participate or not to participate would not affect their treatment or rehabilitation services. Every effort was made to ensure that the confidentiality, privacy, safety and welfare of the participants were protected throughout the study. Pseudonyms for the participants were used in this study for anonymity and privacy; the name of the centers where the study was conducted is not mentioned in this paper to protect the identity of the participants and the dignity of the centers. Interviews were conducted in a private room to maintain confidentiality. In handling disclosure related to criminal activities such as substance abuse, the researcher followed the child and youth center protocols and ethical guidelines. Furthermore, researchers treated the adolescents with dignity, respect and non-judgmental attitudes throughout the study to protect their rights, safety and emotional wellbeing. All audio recordings, transcripts, field notes and consent forms are stored in a locked storage accessible to the researcher and supervisor.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. To enhance credibility, the researcher conducted prolonged engagement with the participants within the secure Child and Youth Care Center to develop rapport and gain a deeper understanding of the adolescents' behavioral experiences. Member checking was further conducted during and after interviews, whereby the researcher summarized participants' responses and allowed participants to confirm the accuracy and meaning of the information provided. The use of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews also assisted in capturing participants' experiences accurately.

To ensure the reliability of the study, the researcher provided a clear and detailed explanation of the methods. This included the study setting, how participants were chosen, how interviews were conducted, how data were analyzed, and how ethical issues were handled. The use of an NVivo tool to organize, code, and manage data in a systematic way made the analysis more consistent and transparent.

Confirmability of the research findings was ensured through the researcher's reflection and maintenance of an audit trail throughout the study. The researcher's field notes, reflexive notes, interview audio-recordings and transcripts, the coding and theme development processes and all corresponding documentation were recorded to ensure that the findings were rooted in the adolescents' experiences and not those of the researcher.

The transferability of the findings was ensured through a rich and detailed description of the research context, the characteristics of the participants and their experiences of behavioral problems in a secure care center for adolescents in the Vhembe District. With this rich information, potential readers and future researchers can make a judgment about how far the findings of this study can be applied to other situations.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Participants Characteristics

The selected participants consisted of four girls and eight boys between 15 and 17 years. All participating candidates had dropped out of school. Four of them were abandoned by their parents since birth. While the other eight participants were abandoned between the ages of 2 and 12 years as illustrated in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics.

| Participants (P) Pseudonyms | Gender | Age | Age of Living in the Absence of Parents | Level of Education   |
|-----------------------------|--------|-----|-----------------------------------------|----------------------|
| P1                          | Female | 17  | From age of 02                          | Drop out at Grade 08 |
| P2                          | Female | 15  | From age of 7                           | Drop out at Grade 3  |
| P3                          | Male   | 16  | From age of 7                           | Drop out at Grade 5  |
| P4                          | Female | 17  | From birth                              | Drop out at Grade 11 |
| P5                          | Female | 16  | From birth                              | Drop out at Grade 9  |
| P6                          | Male   | 15  | From 3 years                            | Drop out at Grade 5  |
| P7                          | Male   | 17  | From 12 years                           | Drop out at Grade 10 |
| P8                          | Male   | 15  | From birth                              | Drop out at Grade 7  |
| P9                          | Male   | 17  | From 5 years                            | Drop out at Grade 08 |
| P10                         | Male   | 17  | From 7 years                            | Drop out at Grade 6  |
| P11                         | Male   | 15  | From 7 years                            | Drop out at Grade 7  |
| P12                         | Male   | 16  | From birth                              | Drop out at Grade 8  |

#### 3.2. Findings

This paper forms part of the broader qualitative study; therefore, this paper will specifically focus on the themes that address behavior-related issues. Consequently, only findings relevant to these themes are presented and discussed below. This manuscript specifically focuses on behavior-related issues as part of a larger qualitative study involving adolescents in conflict with the law. Therefore, findings not directly related to behavioral issues, including broader psychosocial and resilience-related experiences, were not explored extensively in this manuscript and may be presented in future publications arising from the larger study. Table 2 illustrates the themes and subthemes that emerged from this study.

**Table 2.** Theme and subthemes.

| Themes                                                                                                                 | Subthemes                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Section 3.2.1. Theme 1: Behavioral experiences and school disengagement among adolescents living without parental care | Section: Emotional and behavioral responses to adverse living conditions                  |
|                                                                                                                        | Section: Early initiation into substance use                                              |
|                                                                                                                        | Section: Narratives surrounding school dropout (processes and contributing circumstances) |
|                                                                                                                        | Section: Survival-oriented delinquent behavior                                            |
| Section 3.2.2. Theme 2: Emotional experiences associated with growing up without parental care                         | Section: Peer and social relationship challenges                                          |
|                                                                                                                        | Section: Experiences of neglect and abandonment                                           |
|                                                                                                                        | Section: Premature independence and self-reliance                                         |

#### 3.2.1. Theme 1: Behavioral Experiences and School Disengagement Among Adolescents Living Without Parental Care

This theme illustrates how adolescents constructed meaning around their behavioral responses and schooling trajectories within contexts of parental absence. Rather than being direct outcomes of parental absence, the findings suggest a dynamic interaction be-

tween environmental constraints, peer contexts, and individual coping strategies. In line with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, behavior is understood as emerging through reciprocal interactions between the individual, their environment, and observed social models. However, in this study, modeling was not merely an imitation of negative behavior; it also reflected adaptive attempts to cope with constrained environments.

#### Emotional and Behavioral Responses to Adverse Living Conditions

Participants described emotional distress and behavioral withdrawal that emerged in response to unstable caregiving environments. These responses were not simply caused by the absence of parents but were shaped by limited emotional scaffolding and inconsistent adult support systems, which influenced how adolescents regulated their emotions and decision-making.

One participant explained:

*"I used to feel like nobody cares about me... so I just do what I want." (P3)*

This reflects not a direct behavioral effect but a weakening of perceived relational support, which in Bandura's terms reduces positive reinforcement for prosocial behavior. The absence of consistent modeling from caregivers meant that emotional regulation was often self-constructed, increasing vulnerability to impulsive coping strategies.

#### Early Initiation into Substance Use

Substance use was described as a coping mechanism embedded in peer environments rather than a direct consequence of parental absence. Adolescents reported exposure to peer groups where substance use was normalized and where acceptance was reinforced through participation.

As evidenced by:

*"When I started staying with friends, I saw them smoking... they told me it helps to forget problems." (P7)*

From a social cognitive perspective, this illustrates observational learning and reinforcement, but importantly, the behavior was sustained not only through imitation but also through social belonging and emotional relief. Thus, substance use functioned as an adaptive response to emotional strain rather than simply deviant behavior.

#### Narratives Surrounding School Dropout (Processes and Contributing Circumstances)

School disengagement was not presented as a discrete behavioral outcome but as a gradual process of exclusion and withdrawal. Participants described intersecting structural and social factors that shaped their pathway out of school, including poverty, lack of uniforms, ridicule from peers, and absence of adult advocacy.

As evidenced by the following:

*"I stopped going to school because I didn't have uniform... others laughed at me every day." (P2)*

*"There was no one at home to push me to go to school... so I just stopped." (P5)*

*"I tried to go, but after many problems I just gave up." (P11)*

These narratives suggest that dropout is better understood as a progressive disengagement process, where repeated experiences of stigma and material deprivation weaken perceived self-efficacy in maintaining school participation. Importantly, within Bandura's framework, self-efficacy is shaped through reinforcement and social feedback. Here, negative peer responses functioned as punitive reinforcement, reducing motivation to persist in schooling. However, this should not be interpreted as deterministic; rather, it reflects how constrained environments limit access to protective reinforcement.

### Survival-Oriented Delinquent Behavior

Participants' accounts of delinquent behavior were framed as survival strategies within resource-limited environments. Rather than being direct expressions of deviance, these behaviors were described as attempts to secure basic needs or social protection.

Participants explained:

*"Sometimes you have to steal food because there is nothing at home." (P6)*

*"No one was taking care of me, so I had to find ways to survive." (P1)*

*"When you are on your own, you do things you never thought you would do." (P8)*

This indicates that behavior emerged from contextual necessity rather than inherent disposition. In Bandura's terms, while behavior is learned through environmental interaction, here the environment did not consistently provide prosocial models or reinforcement for alternative strategies, narrowing behavioral options. Thus, delinquency is analytically understood as an adaptive agency within constrained structural conditions, not simply imitation of negative models.

### Peer and Social Relationship Challenges

Peer relationships emerged as both a risk and a protective space. While peers facilitated exposure to substance use and school disengagement, they also provided emotional belonging in the absence of parental care.

*"I stayed with friends because there was no peace at home." (P7)*

*"If you don't have parents, your friends become everything." (P12)*

*"Sometimes friends influence you to do bad things, but you just want to belong." (P4)*

This dual role highlights an important analytical insight: peer influence is not inherently negative but becomes influential in contexts where adult relational structures are weakened. Bandura's concept of modeling must therefore be expanded here to include emotional modeling and belonging reinforcement, not just behavioral imitation.

### 3.2.2. Theme 2: Emotional Experiences Associated with Growing Up Without Parental Care

The emotional experiences described by adolescents in this study reflect disrupted relational development shaped by early caregiving absence and unstable social environments prior to their admission into a secure child and youth care center in the Vhembe District. Within the framework of Social Cognitive Theory, these emotional experiences can be understood as emerging through reciprocal interactions between environmental conditions, observed relational patterns, and the internalization of social experiences over time. However, rather than viewing emotions as individually generated, the findings suggest that emotional development in this sample is closely linked to the absence of consistent caregiving models that typically provide emotional regulation, reinforcement, and relational security during adolescence.

### Experiences of Neglect and Abandonment

Participants consistently described emotional experiences characterized by feelings of neglect, abandonment, and lack of belonging within their family environments prior to admission into the secure care center. These experiences were not isolated emotional reactions but reflected prolonged exposure to inconsistent caregiving and limited emotional responsiveness within their developmental environments.

As evidenced by:

*"I always felt like nobody was there for me... like I was just on my own." (P2)*

*"At home there was no care, no one asking where I am or how I feel." (P5)*

*"It was like I was invisible in my own family." (P1)*

*"I grew up feeling like I don't belong anywhere." (P9)*

From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, these narratives suggest the absence of positive emotional modeling and reinforcement within primary caregiving systems. In environments where emotional responsiveness is limited, adolescents are less likely to observe or internalize stable models of emotional regulation and belonging. Instead, emotional meaning is constructed through repeated experiences of exclusion and disconnection within their immediate social contexts. This does not imply emotional deficiency but rather reflects how environmental deprivation shapes emotional learning processes over time. In the context of adolescents in conflict with the law residing in a secure care center, these experiences illustrate how earlier relational environments influenced emotional development prior to institutional placement. Therefore, feelings of neglect and abandonment reflect the absence of consistent emotional modeling and reinforcement within early caregiving environments, shaping how adolescents learned to interpret belonging and emotional security.

#### Premature Independence and Self-Reliance

Participants further described having to assume independence and responsibility at an early age due to limited caregiving support. This "premature independence" was not experienced as developmental readiness but rather as a response to environmental demands where consistent adult guidance was not available. As evidenced by the following quotes:

*"I had to learn to take care of myself because no one was there." (P6)*

*"Even when I was still young, I had to find ways to survive on my own." (P3)*

*"You grow up fast when there is no parent to depend on." (P8)*

*"I became independent early because I had no choice." (P11)*

Within Social Cognitive Theory, such patterns can be understood through the concept of environmental modeling and reinforcement, where adolescents adapt their behavior based on the absence of caregiving models and the demands of their surroundings. In contexts where adult support is inconsistent, adolescents may develop self-reliance as an adaptive behavioral response reinforced by necessity rather than guided learning. However, this form of independence differs from positive self-efficacy development, as it emerges in environments with limited emotional scaffolding and reduced opportunities for guided skill acquisition.

Within this study's sample of adolescents in a secure care center in the Vhembe District, premature independence reflects how environmental constraints shaped behavioral adaptation prior to institutional placement. Therefore, early self-reliance reflects adaptive behavioral learning in response to limited caregiving modeling and environmental demands, rather than supported developmental independence.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the experiences of adolescents in conflict with the law who were residing in a secure child and youth care center in the Vhembe District and who had grown up without consistent parental care are shaped by an interaction of socioeconomic hardship, disrupted caregiving environments, and peer relational systems. Rather than interpreting behavioral and emotional outcomes as direct consequences of parental absence, the findings suggest that adolescent development occurs within constrained environments where multiple risk and protective factors operate simultaneously.

This aligns with ecological frameworks which emphasize that adolescent behavior is best understood through the interaction between individuals and their social environments.

A key finding in this sample relates to how socioeconomic disadvantage influenced adolescents' self-perception and emotional wellbeing, particularly within their earlier schooling experiences prior to admission into the secure care center. Participants described experiences of exclusion and comparison with peers, which affected their sense of belonging and confidence. Similar studies have shown that poverty and material deprivation contribute to reduced self-esteem through repeated experiences of stigma and limited participation in normative social activities [9,10,27]. These findings highlight that self-perception is socially constructed through interaction rather than being an individual trait and are consistent with literature emphasizing the role of parental support and affirmation in adolescent emotional development [9,10]. The internalization of negative peer experiences and social criticism has also been linked to reduced self-worth and emotional insecurity in adolescents [14,28].

Peer relationships emerged as a significant context for behavioral learning and emotional coping among adolescents both prior to and during their placement in the secure care center in the Vhembe District. Participants described relying on peers for emotional support and belonging, particularly where adult caregiving systems were weak or absent. Substance use was described within a peer context as a coping mechanism for emotional distress and social inclusion. This is consistent with prior studies which show that adolescents in disadvantaged settings may adopt peer-validated behaviors as a form of emotional regulation and social integration [14,28–30]. From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, this reflects observational learning and reinforcement; however, the findings extend this understanding by showing that reinforcement is primarily emotional rather than behavioral in nature.

School disengagement emerged as a gradual process rather than a single event within the life histories of the adolescents in this sample. Participants' narratives suggest that withdrawal from schooling was influenced by repeated exposure to material barriers, stigma, and reduced educational support in their pre-institutional environments. Previous research supports this interpretation by showing that school dropout is often linked to cumulative disadvantage and social exclusion rather than individual failure or lack of motivation [31–33]. These findings therefore suggest that educational disengagement reflects weakening institutional attachment over time and should be understood as part of a broader trajectory of social exclusion rather than a discrete behavioral outcome.

The study also found that some adolescents engaged in survival-oriented behaviors in response to unmet basic needs within their earlier home and community environments. These behaviors should be understood within the context of constrained choices rather than individual deviance. Similar studies have shown that adolescents in vulnerable contexts may engage in survival strategies when formal support systems are unavailable [34,35]. This highlights the importance of recognizing agency within structural limitations and avoiding deterministic interpretations of behavior among vulnerable youth populations.

Emotional experiences such as loneliness, sadness, and disconnection were consistently reported across participants in the secure care center sample. These experiences reflect disruptions in stable caregiving and attachment relationships within their pre-institutional environments, as well as separation from family due to legal placement. Attachment-based studies similarly emphasize that emotional wellbeing in adolescence is closely linked to secure and consistent relational bonds [15,36–38]. The absence of such bonds may contribute to emotional insecurity and relational instability, particularly in contexts where adolescents experience prolonged separation from primary caregivers [39–41].

From a theoretical perspective, Social Cognitive Theory provides a useful lens for understanding behavioral learning in this context; however, its application must be grounded in the lived realities of adolescents in conflict with the law residing in a secure care center. Behavioral modeling and reinforcement processes occurred within both pre-admission community environments and peer interactions within the institutional setting. In this sample, behavioral learning was shaped by exposure to observed behaviors across multiple environments, including family, peers, and community systems prior to admission. This is supported by literature highlighting that environments characterized by poverty, violence, and limited supervision often provide models of maladaptive coping behaviors [20,41]. However, the findings suggest that learning processes in this context are not limited to imitation but are shaped by emotionally meaningful reinforcement embedded within constrained social environments.

## 5. Study Recommendations

An integrated, multi-sectoral intervention approach is recommended to support adolescents in conflict with the law who are residing in secure child and youth care facilities within the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. Strengthening collaboration between the Department of Social Development, Department of Health, Department of Education, Department of Justice, and relevant community-based organizations is essential to ensure the implementation of a coordinated psychosocial, educational, behavioral, and socioeconomic support framework tailored to the needs of this population.

Social workers and psychologists working with these adolescents and their families should implement structured, trauma-informed psychosocial interventions within schools, communities, and child and youth care centers. Within secure care settings, rehabilitation programs should focus on strengthening self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional regulation, decision-making skills, and adaptive behavioral functioning. Such interventions should also promote healthy coping strategies, enhance positive peer relationships, and reduce exposure to negative peer influences that may contribute to harmful behavioral patterns.

School-based support systems should be strengthened to enable early identification of learners at risk, alongside the provision of essential educational support such as school nutrition programs, uniforms, and learning materials. Targeted interventions addressing school attendance challenges and learning difficulties should be prioritized to enhance educational engagement and continuity.

Furthermore, socioeconomic conditions contributing to vulnerability and involvement in unlawful survival-related activities should be addressed through improved access to social assistance, food security initiatives, vocational training, and youth employment opportunities. Entrepreneurship development, career guidance, and vocational rehabilitation programs may further support long-term economic independence and social reintegration.

Finally, future longitudinal research is recommended to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of integrated psychosocial and socioeconomic interventions, as well as their short- and long-term outcomes in relation to behavioral adjustment, educational attainment, mental health, substance use patterns, and community reintegration among adolescents in similar contexts.

## 6. Strengths and Limitations

The study has strengths and limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. A key strength is that it explored the behavioral and emotional experiences of adolescents in conflict with the law residing in a secure child and youth care center in

the Limpopo Province, a population that is both vulnerable and under-researched within this context. The study was guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which provided a useful framework for understanding how environmental factors, peer systems, and learning processes shape behavioral and emotional experiences among the participants.

However, the study was conducted in a single secure care center in the Limpopo Province and involved a relatively small sample of adolescents, which limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional or community contexts. In addition, the sensitive nature of the topic may have influenced the extent to which participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences, as some may have withheld information due to concerns about judgment or confidentiality.

## 7. Conclusions

This study concludes that the behavioral and emotional experiences of adolescents in conflict with the law who grew up without consistent parental care in a secure child and youth care center in the Vhembe District are shaped by interconnected socioeconomic, relational, and environmental factors rather than by parental absence alone. The findings show that participants' experiences must be understood within their specific life contexts, including poverty, disrupted caregiving histories, peer relational influences, and prior exposure to social exclusion. Behaviors such as substance use, school disengagement, and survival-oriented actions reflect adaptive responses to constrained environments and unmet psychosocial needs, while emotional experiences highlight disrupted relational security and feelings of disconnection. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of avoiding deterministic interpretations and instead recognizing the complex interaction between context, agency, and social learning processes, thereby supporting the need for integrated, context-sensitive interventions that strengthen psychosocial support, educational inclusion, and stable relational systems for adolescents in similar settings through collaboration between social workers, mental health practitioners, educators, community structures, families, and policymakers.

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