

Struggling Alone in the City: How Single Parents Navigate Education and Upkeep of Children in Urban Environments in Uganda

Kukundakwe Rebecca, Asingwire Richard, Mugisa James, Kisembo John, Anumaka Ijeoma, Businge Janice
Makerere University

Abstract: *Single-parent households in large cities face intersecting challenges that negatively affect children's educational outcomes and household wellbeing. Economic precarity, unaffordable housing and childcare, precarious employment, and limited social support networks create barriers to school attendance, learning support at home, and access to enrichment activities. This review synthesizes international empirical and review literature to identify major stressors, mediating mechanisms, and promising policy and program responses. Using an ecological theoretical lens (Bronfenbrenner) integrated with social capital and resilience frameworks, we show how macro (policy, labor markets), meso (neighborhoods, schools), and micro (household resources, parental stress) factors interact to shape educational trajectories of children raised by single parents in cities. Policy recommendations include targeted income supports, affordable childcare and housing, school-based wraparound services, and employer flexibility.*

Keywords: Single parents, Urban poverty, Education, Childcare, Social capital, Resilience, Maternal economic mobility

Introduction

Single-parent families—especially single mothers—are disproportionately represented among urban poor populations and face heightened risk of economic hardship and material deprivation. This disadvantage has implications for children's schooling: lower academic achievement, interrupted school attendance, and limited access to extracurricular supports are commonly observed among children raised in single-parent urban households. Recent policy analyses and empirical studies emphasize that the combination of high housing costs, childcare scarcity, and precarious low-wage employment in cities amplifies these effects and increases parental stress and time poverty.

Methodology

This paper is a narrative integrative review that synthesizes peer-reviewed reviews, policy reports, and empirical studies focused on single-parent households and child education in urban contexts. Searches were conducted across academic databases and policy repositories (e.g., PubMed/PMC, Scopus, Urban Institute, policy briefs) for literature from 2010–2025 with emphasis on comprehensive reviews and high-impact empirical studies. Inclusion criteria: (1) studies addressing single-parent households (defined as custodial single mothers/fathers or single caregivers), (2) focus on urban or metropolitan contexts, and (3) outcomes related to children's education or household upkeeps (income, housing, childcare). The review prioritized meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and policy syntheses, supplemented by recent empirical papers to capture up-to-date trends and policy developments. Key sources informing the synthesis include Parolin (2022) on economic precarity, Amato (2015) on educational impacts, Urban Institute (2025) policy levers for single mothers, Silva-Laya (2020) on urban poverty and education, and Cartwright (2023) on urban poverty impact on learning.

Theoretical Frameworks Used

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory — used to structure how macro (policy, labor markets), exo/meso (neighborhoods, schools, childcare systems), and micro (family resources, parent–child interactions) layers interact to produce educational outcomes for children in single-parent urban households.

Social Capital Theory — to examine how parents' networks (informal kin, community organizations, school relationships) buffer or fail to buffer material constraints and facilitate access to educational supports.

Resilience and Cumulative Risk Models — to understand protective factors (e.g., supportive schools, high-quality childcare, cash supports) that mitigate risks and promote positive schooling outcomes despite adversity.

These frameworks allow integrating disparate findings—economic, psychosocial, and institutional - to explain pathways from single-parent status to educational outcomes.

Literature Review - Key Themes

Economic Precarity & Material Hardship: Single parents experience disproportionate economic instability—lower earnings, higher poverty rates, and vulnerability to income shocks—that constrain resources for schooling (books, internet, tutoring) and stable housing near quality schools. Parolin (2022) documents heightened economic precarity among single-parent families and links it directly to material hardship.

Housing instability & neighborhood effects: High urban housing costs force many single-parent families into substandard, overcrowded, or less-resourced neighborhoods, which affects school quality, safety, and access to supportive community resources—factors tied to poorer educational outcomes. Urban poverty literature highlights spatial concentration of disadvantage as a mediator.

Childcare, Time Poverty, and Work Schedules: Lack of affordable, reliable childcare pushes single parents into precarious work arrangements (night shifts, part-time juggling), reducing time available to supervise homework, attend school meetings, or engage in enrichment activities. Policy analyses stress that childcare costs are one of the principal barriers to economic mobility for single mothers.

Parental Stress, Mental Health, and Parenting Capacity: Financial strain and time pressure increase parental stress and mental health burdens, undermining consistent parenting behaviors and the home learning environment. Several studies report associations between parental stress and lower child academic performance.

School Engagement & Institutional Supports: Schools that provide wraparound services (meals, counseling, after-school programs) and strong family–school communication mitigate some deficits. Evidence suggests that interventions targeted at school-level supports can improve attendance and achievement among children from single-parent households.

Findings (Synthesis)

Children of single parents in cities perform, on average, worse on standardized educational outcomes than peers from two-parent households—though effect sizes vary and are partially mediated by income, parental education, and neighborhood context.

Economic supports and reduced caregiving burdens (affordable childcare, cash transfers, stable housing) are consistently associated with better schooling outcomes and increased parental labor-market stability.

Time poverty and nonstandard work schedules are major mechanisms reducing parental capacity to support schooling; employer flexibility and childcare availability are key mitigators.

Social capital and school-based supports can partially offset material lack—strong community networks and proactive schools are linked to improved attendance and engagement.

Discussion on Findings

The evidence indicates that single-parent status is less a direct causal factor and more a marker for a cluster of intersecting disadvantages—low income, precarious work, housing instability, and time scarcity—that together impair parenting capacity and children's school experiences. Bronfenbrenner's ecological lens clarifies how policy-level deficits (insufficient childcare subsidy, inadequate housing policy) ripple down to household-level constraints. Social capital emerges as a crucial moderator: where single parents have access to extended family, community organizations, or school liaisons, many negative outcomes are attenuated. Resilience frameworks highlight that targeted interventions (cash assistance, school wraparound services, flexible employment policies) are plausible levers to improve both family stability and children's academic prospects. Policy work (e.g., Urban Institute) underscores the importance of integrated policy packages rather than isolated fixes.

Conclusions

Single parents in large cities face a constellation of barriers that shape children's educational outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires multi-level interventions: direct economic supports, expanded affordable childcare, housing stabilization, employer-family-friendly policies, and investment in schools' capacity to provide wraparound services. Strengthening social capital and community-based supports further enhances resilience among these families.

Recommendations

For policymakers, NGOs, and schools

Income supports: Implement targeted cash transfers or tax credits for single-parent households to reduce material deprivation.

Affordable childcare: Expand subsidized childcare and flexible hours to align with nonstandard work shifts.

Housing stability: Prioritize housing vouchers or affordable housing allocation for single-parent families to reduce neighborhood turnover and schooling disruption.

School-based wraparound services: Fund after-school tutoring, mental-health counseling, and family liaisons in schools serving high proportions of single-parent households.

Employer flexibility: Encourage policies facilitating predictable scheduling, paid family leave, and flexible hours to reduce time poverty.

Community networks: Support community hubs and parent peer-support programs to build social capital and informal childcare/shared resource mechanisms.

References

Amato, P. R. (2015). *Single-Parent Households and Children's Educational Outcomes: A Review*. [Article]. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4508674/>.

Cartwright, M. (2023). *Addressing the educational challenges of urban poverty*. [Article].

Parolin, Z. (2022). *Economic Precarity among Single Parents in the United States*. [Article].

Silva-Laya, M. (2020). *Urban poverty and education: A systematic literature review*. *Children and Youth Services Review*, [details].

Waxman, E. (2025). *Policy Levers to Support Single-Mother Economic Mobility*. Urban Institute. Retrieved from Urban Institute publications.

(Note: full DOI/volume/page details should be added in the manuscript per journal requirements. The references above are the principal sources cited in this review.)

Report. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org>