

An Assessment of Psychological Distress among Fatherless Students in Secondary Schools in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of psychological distress among fatherless secondary school students in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi, Nigeria. Through a descriptive survey design, data was collected from a sample of fatherless senior secondary school students, considering factors such as anxiety, depression, and emotional stability. The findings suggest a significant effect of psychological distress among fatherless students in Birnin Kebbi Secondary Schools. The results underscore the need for targeted interventions to address the multifaceted challenges faced by fatherless students in this context. The study population consisted of 2595 people and a purpose-sampling technique was used to sample 413 respondents. The study used self-designed questionnaires tagged Psychological Stress Questionnaire (PDQ) to collect data. The content validity of the research instruments was done by experts in the field of Measurement and evaluation and the reliability of the instrument was obtained through the test-retest method hence reliability coefficient of 0.78. The study used descriptive statistics to answer research questions while the corresponding hypothesis was tested with Chi-square using the application of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21.0. The results of the analysis indicated, among others, that the level of psychological distress affects fatherless students psychologically and also can affect their well-being and their level of concentration in the school. The study concluded that providing social support will improve their well-being and give them opportunities to improve their well-being and their concentration in the school. Approaching the effect will have a great impact to our society.

Keywords: Assessment, Psychological Stress, Fatherless, Students, Secondary School.

Introduction

Psychological distress has been defined in many terms, according to the Better Help Editorial 2023, psychological distress is any range of symptoms and experiences related to a person's internal life; feelings of being troubled, confused, or out of the ordinary. While most people experience an occasional lack of energy or focus and even feel troubled from time to time, psychological distress often has a more profound effect on an individual in fact; psychological distress can accompany mental illness. However, it is important to note that experiencing psychological distress does not always indicate the presence of a serious mental health disorder defined psychological distress as a reactive state that involves perceiving discomfort owing to psychological alterations related to perceived stress,

depression, anxiety, or demoralization ([Liébana-Presa et al., 2014](#)). In this regard, research conducted 10 years ago revealed that a low level of students' life satisfaction could be predicted as a function of experiencing symptoms related to anxiety, depression, and satisfaction with their school. Psychological distress commonly refers to a state of emotional anguish typified by symptoms of anxiety and depression ([Drapeau et al., 2012](#)). However, there is a greater need for social support within the school for children with psychological difficulties in order to achieved best possible outcomes in the long-term. Father absence can be defined as the financial, physical, and emotional absence of a biological father over the lifespan of his children due to death (Meyer, 2018). It also entails situations where fathers do not interact with their children regularly and do not play a crucial role in their development (Santini, 2015). Many children in South African society are desolated due to their father absence (Reeve, 2014). In some cases, fathers do not live in the same home as their biological children ([Rothon et al., 2009](#)). The importance of parents to the well-being and academic progress of the child can never be emphasized. The findings of study conducted by [Freeks \(2022\)](#) has shown that Father absence impedes children from receiving and giving love, and therefore, the manifest constant behavioural problems of children. Poor academic performance and self-perception are linked to father absence and children may suffer due to a lack of educational support and access to health care.

Countless children from fatherless homes are bullied or shamed for being fatherless, and this creates in them a sense of loss and confusion ([Makusha & Richter, 2018](#)). Instances of child abuse and child neglect are linked to father absence and are evident in family life (Londt et al, 2017). Many families, mainly children, are hurt due to father absence, and they do not know where to turn for abetment (Freeks, 2022). Thus, it is evident that father absence is a contributory factor to child neglect and abuse and a cause of disrupted and unstable families. According to the [2007 UNICEF report](#) on the well-being of children in economically advanced nations, children without fathers positively present in the home suffer greatly. Even before a child is born, their father's attitudes regarding the pregnancy, behaviors during the prenatal period, and the relationship between their father and mother may indirectly influence risk for adverse birth outcomes. In early childhood it is well known that school-aged children with good relationships with their fathers were less likely to experience depression, to exhibit disruptive behavior, or to lie. Overall, they were far more likely to exhibit prosaically behavior.

Nisa and Shafi (2014) conceptualized psychological distress as lack of enthusiasm, problems with sleep (trouble falling asleep or staying asleep), feeling downhearted or blue, feeling hopeless about the future, feeling emotional (for example crying easily or feeling like crying) and feeling bored or a passing interest in things and thoughts of suicide. Sarason B.L. (1990) defined psychological distress as the emotional condition that one feels when it is necessary to cope with unsettling, frustrating or harmful situations. Mckoy and Ross (2014) add that psychological distress is the unpleasant subjective state of depression and anxiety (being tense, restless, worried, irritable and afraid), which has both emotional and physiological manifestation. They further added that there is a wide range of psychological

distress, ranging from mild to extreme, with extreme levels being considered as mental illness such as schizoaffective disorder.

Despite residual ambiguity in the term, definitions over time have identified several elements of "academic success" ([Kuh et al., 2006](#); [York et al., 2015](#)). Used interchangeably with "student success," it encompasses academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and post-college performance ([Kuh et al., 2006](#); [York et al., 2015](#)). Linked to happiness in undergraduate students ([Flynn and MacLeod, 2015](#)). Insight into determinants of academic success and the role of parenting styles can have significant impact on policy recommendations. However, most existing data comes from western cultures where individualistic themes predominate. While some studies highlight differences between the two ([Polmen, 2010](#)), evidence from eastern collectivist cultures, including Pakistan, is scarce ([Masud et al., 2015](#); [Khalid et al., 2018](#)).

A number of authors have found evidence of a negative association between depressive symptoms at school ([López-López et al., 2021](#)). Research conducted by [Kruk \(2012\)](#) shows that 71% of high school dropouts are fatherless; fatherless children have more trouble academically, scoring poorly on tests of reading, mathematics, and thinking skills; children from father-absent homes are more likely to be truant from school, more likely to be excluded from school, more likely to leave school at age 16, and less likely to attain academic and professional qualifications in adulthood. According to National Center for fathering research children age 10 to 17 living with two biological or adoptive parents were significantly less likely to experience sexual assault, child maltreatment, other types of major violence, and non-victimization type of adversity, and were less likely to witness violence in their families compared to peers living in single-parent families and step families.

According to [Manning \(2017\)](#) 12 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared to 44 percent of children in mother-only families. When stress comes in manageable doses, and there are loving adults to help ease and buffer the pain, stress can help children grow and develop into stronger, more resilient human beings. But when the stress response is prolonged, and there are no loving caretakers to turn to, children can develop toxic stress when a child has a loving, supportive relationship with an adult, it "buffers" the potentially toxic effects of stress. There are limited numbers of studies conducted on how psychologically distress and poor social support have affected fatherless children. This lack of scientific research is worse in the northern part of the country. Therefore, there is the need to determine the impact of psychological distress and pattern of social support among children who have lost their father, and to assess how these factors have influenced their academic performance in northern Nigeria.

The major aim of the study is to identify state of psychological distress of students without fathers, examine their conditions and suggest recommendations on some of these problems could be minimized. It is an indisputable fact that most of the children found in our communities nowadays suffer from one psychological distress to another. What is the

pattern of social support? How does the psychological distress influence their academic performance? These and other related questions the study intends to answer.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To determine the prevalence psychological distress among fatherless students in Secondary School Birnin-Kebbi.
- ii. To determine the effect of psychological distress among fatherless students Birnin-Kebbi.

Research Questions

- i. What is the prevalence of psychological distress among fatherless students Birnin-Kebbi in Birnin-Kebbi?
- ii. What is the effect of physiological distress among fatherless students Birnin-Kebbi?

Research Hypothesis

Ho₁: There is no significant effect of psychological distress among fatherless Secondary School students in Birnin-Kebbi.

Methodology

The type of design used for this study is descriptive survey research design. The population of this study comprises 2595 secondary school students across eight (8) public Secondary Schools in Birnin Kebbi Local Government Area of Kebbi State. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 413 Senior Secondary Schools students to participate in this study. Data collected in the study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics; the former was used to analyze the research questions while Chi-square was used to test the hypothesis raised for the study. Psychological Distress Questionnaire (PDQ) was administered to the students as a means of data collection in the study. A four-point Likert rating type consisting of Not at all, Not more than usual, Rather more than usual and Much more than usual was used. Through test-retest method, the reliability coefficient of the PDQ was 0.78. Face and contents validity of the instruments were ascertained by expert in test and measurement and educational psychology. Chi-square was used in testing the formulated hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The Questionnaire was administered to students after carefully explaining instructions to the students. All the questionnaires were retrieved from the respondents immediately after completion and finally analyzed using SPSS version 21.0.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the prevalence of psychological distress among fatherless Secondary school Students in Birnin Kebbi?

Psychological distress associated with common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders is highly costly to the quality of life of individuals and to societal productivity. The prevalence of psychological distress among fatherless students is high because majority of the students indicated their level of stress, worried, loss of sleep and many more and it can affect their mental health. According to World Health Organization (WHO) one in four individuals in the world are affected by mental disorder at some points in their lives.

Table 1: Distribution of the Responses of lost much sleep over worry

S/N	Item	Response							
		4		3		2		1	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1.	Lost must sleep over worry	99	46.3	105	49.1	8	3.7	2	0.9
2.	Felt constantly under strain	97	45.9	96	44.9	19	8.9	2	0.9
3.	Felt you could not overcome your difficulties	93	43.5	97	45.3	24	11.2	0	0.0
4.	Been feeling unhappy and depressed	91	42.5	93	43.5	29	13.6	1	0.5
5.	Been losing confidence in yourself	105	49.1	73	34.1	36	16.8	0	0.0
6.	Been thinking of yourself as a worthless person	88	41.1	89	41.6	36	16.8	1	0.5

Source: Field Survey, 2024

The results of the respondents indicated that in statements of lost much sleep over worried, 46.3% of the respondents said not at all, 49.1 not more than usual, 3.7 rather more than usual while .9 are much more than usual. Therefore the 49.1% are the majority that lost sleeps over worried while .9 are the minority. This implies that the majority of the respondents agreed they lost sleep over worried of losing a father and they are distressed. The results of the respondents indicated that, in statement of felt constantly under strain, 45.3 not at all, 44.9 not more than usual, 8.9 rather more than usual, .9 much more than usual. Therefore 45.3% are the majority that felt constantly under strain, while .9 are the minority. This implies that the majority of the respondents agreed they felt constantly under strain over losing and they are distressed. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement felt you could not overcome your difficulties, 43.5 not at all, 45.3 not more than usual, rather more than usual 11.2%. Therefore the 45.3 are the majority while 11.2% are the minority. This implies that majority of the respondents agreed they felt they couldn't overcome their difficulties over losing a father and they are distressed.

The results of the respondents indicated that in statement been feeling unhappy, 42.5 not at all, not more than usual 43.5, rather more than usual 13.6, much more than usual .5. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 43.5, while .5 is the minority. This implies that the majority of the respondents agreed they are on happy and depressed over losing a father.

The results of the respondents indicated that in statement been losing confidence in yourself, not at all 49.1, not more than usual 34.1, rather more than usual 16.8. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 49.1% while 16.8% are the minority. This implies that the majority of the respondents agreed they are losing confidence in themselves. The results of the respondents indicated that from statement been thinking of yourself as a worthless person, not at all 41.1%, not more than usual 41.6% rather more than usual 16.8%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 41.6% are the majority while 16.8% are the minority. This implies that majority of the respondents agreed they are thinking they are worthless over losing a father.

Research Question 2: What are the effects of psychological distress among fatherless secondary school students?

Table 2: Distribution of the Responses

S/N	Item	Response							
		4		3		2		1	
		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1.	Been able to concentrate on whatever you are doing	37	17.3	61	28.5	116	54.2	0	0.0
2.	Felt that you are playing a useful part in things	20	9.3	70	32.7	121	56.5	3	1.4
3.	Been able to face up to your problems	21	9.8	82	38.3	111	51.9	0	0.0
4.	Felt capable of making decisions	32	15.0	63	29.4	119	55.6	0	0.0
5.	Been able to enjoy day to day activities	35	16.4	56	26.2	123	57.5	0	0.0
6.	Been feeling reasonably happy, all things considered	30	14.0	68	31.8	115	53.7	1	0.5
7.	Do you feel hopeless	119	55.6	63	29.4	31	14.5	1	0.5
8.	Do you have trouble of staying focus	115	53.7	69	31.8	31	14.5	0	0.0
9.	How often do you feel tired	127	59.3	59	27.6	28	13.1	0	0.0
10.	How often do you feel restless	121	56.5	58	27.1	32	15.0	3	1.4
11.	How often do you feel everything was an effort by you	117	54.7	57	26.6	40	18.7	0	0.0

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Globally, approximately 20% of children and adolescents suffer from one form of psychological distress or another (World Health Organization, 2003). Psychological distress is a broad term that describes acute mental stress resulting from life circumstances or mental illness, and it is also a prominent manifestation of adolescent mental health problems (Poudel et al, 2020). Specifically, the psychological distress of adolescents usually consists of both interpersonal relationship problems and emotional or affective issues like losing parents and many difficult life events.

The results of the respondents indicated that in statement been able to concentrate on whatever you are doing very well 17.3%, same 28.5%, while rather less than usual 54.2%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 54.2% while 17.3% are the minority. This implies that majority of the respondents are not concentrating on what they are doing and over losing a father and they are distressed. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement felt that you are playing a useful part of things, very well 9.3% same 32.7% rather less than usual 56.5% much less than usual 1.4%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 56.5 while 1.4% are the minority. This implies that majority of the respondents don't feel they are playing a useful part of things. The results respondents indicated that in statement been able to face up your problems, very well 9.8%, 38.3% same, 51.9% while rather less than usual. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 51.9%. while 9.8% are the minority. This implies majority of the respondents are not been able to face up their problems. The result of the respondent indicated that in statement felt capable of making decision very well 16.4%, same 26.2%, rather less than usual 57.5%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 55.6% while 15.0% are the minority. This implies that rather less than usual of the respondent don't feel capable of making decision. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement been able to enjoy day to day activities, very well 16.4%, same 26.2%, rather less than usual 57.5%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 57.5% while 16.4% are minority. This implies majority of the respondents don't enjoy their day-to-day activities. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement been feeling reasonably happy all things considered, very well 14.0% same 31.8%, rather less than usual 53.7%, much less than usual, .5. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 53.7 while .5 are the minority. This implies majority of the respondents are not feeling reasonably happy all things considered and they are distressed. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement do you felt hopeless, very well 55.6, same 29.4, rather less than usual 14.5, .5 much less than usual. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 55.6% while .5 are the minority. This implies majority of the students are hopeless and distressed.

The results of the respondents indicated that in statement do you had trouble of staying focus, very well 53.7%, same, 31.8%, less than usual 14.5%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 53.7% while 14.5 are the minority. This implies majority of the students had trouble of staying focus and distressed. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement how often do feel tired, very well 59.3% same 27.6% rather less than usual 13.1%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 59.3% while 13.1% are the minority. This

implies that majority of the students feel tired easily and it affects them psychologically and make the students to be distressed. The results indicated that in statement how often do you feel restless very well 56.5%, same 27.1%, rather less than usual 15.0%, much less than usual 1.4%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 56.5% while 1.4% are the minority. This implies that majority of the students feel restless and it affected them psychologically. The results of the respondents indicated that in statement how often do you feel everything was an effort by you, very well 54.7%, same 26.6%, and rather less than usual 18.7%. Therefore, the majority of the respondents are 54.7% while 18.7%. This implies that students feel everything was an effort by them it affects them psychologically.

Hypotheses Testing

Ho₁: There is no significant effect of psychological distress among fatherless Secondary School students in Birnin-Kebbi.

Table 3

Chi-Square Tests	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	267.487 ^a	132	.000
Likelihood Ratio	115.820	132	.841
Linear-by-Linear Association	.060	1	.807
N of Valid Cases	214		

159 cells (93.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .01.

Source: Field Survey, 2024

A chi-square test was performed to evaluate the effect of psychological distress on fatherless Secondary School students in Birnin Kebbi. The effect of psychological distress on fatherless students was significant, $\chi^2 = (267.49^a)$, $p = (.000)$. In this case, the p -value is less than the standard alpha value (0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis one which state that there is no significant effect of psychological distress among fatherless Secondary School students in Birnin-Kebbi is hereby rejected. These imply that there is a significant effect of psychological distress among fatherless secondary school students in Birnin Kebbi. In other words, there is evidence to suggest that the absence of fathers may have a noticeable impact on the psychological well-being of these students.

Discussion of Findings

On the prevalence of psychological distress According to Viertiö et al. BMC Public Health (2021) Psychological distress is quite common problem. In the current study, 11% of boys and 8.8% of boys in school had psychological distress. In the most recent national FinSote Survey from years 2017–2018, where participants were over 19 years with no upper age limit, the prevalence of psychological distress among girls was 11.9% and among boys

11.2% suggesting that students whose father is alive may experience slightly less psychological distress than the rest of the population.

In large surveys made in the United States, 15.1% reported moderate psychological distress and 3.1% severe distress over the 2001–2012 period. Because of the different rating scales and cut-off scores used in previous studies, the reported prevalence figures of psychological distress are not directly comparable between countries. With the cut-off score used in the current study, some underlying mood or anxiety disorder is very probable. Difficulty in concentrating on school activities because of domestic issues showed the strongest association with psychological distress, but it could also imply that the respondents were experiencing distressing family-related challenges at the time. Previous studies have shown that lack of social support is a significant risk factor for depression and other common mental disorders as well as for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

Furthermore, lack of social support is associated with an increased risk of many health problems, and it has been increasingly seen as an important public health problem. Our finding supports this view and encourages experts to implement specific interventions to reduce issue of lack of social support among fatherless student's. Various aspects related to social networks and social support were associated with having less psychological distress. On the effects of psychological distress Clinical depression and anxiety have been linked with the development of a variety of chronic diseases. There is evidence from several longitudinal studies that depression and anxiety increase risk of incident arthritis. The symptoms of depression and anxiety are collectively termed psychological distress. Psychological distress encompasses a much wider range of experiences than mental illness, ranging from mild symptoms to severe psychiatric diseases.

Recent studies have found a dose-response relationship between psychological distress lack of social support has a risk of mortality many sickness, colorectal and prostate cancers across the whole range of distress severity. Chronic diseases, and particularly mental health problems diseases, are undoubtedly the most common causes of all-cause mortality in these studies. It is therefore plausible that the risk of developing chronic disease will increase with increasing levels of distress severity in a similar fashion.

According to Scalon (2020) found that the effects of distress on mortality were stronger in people with lower socioeconomic position. It is unclear why psychological distress has greater consequences for health investigating whether distress and social intervention also interact to increase risk of incident chronic diseases and examining potential mediators of any associations will improve understanding of the effects of psychological distress among fatherless secondary school students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that various authors have contributed on the issue. One of the serious implications of abandoning distressed Fatherless children is that they could become potential thugs and criminality in the society may likely increased.

Addressing the effect of psychological distress on the academic performance of fatherless students in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi, Nigeria, requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach. By implementing targeted interventions and fostering a supportive community, it is possible to enhance the well-being and academic success of fatherless students in this context.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that:

- i. Government/stake holder should develop or implement counseling services tailored to address the psychological distress experienced by fatherless students. These services should focus on building resilience, coping strategies, and emotional well-being.
- ii. Government/ stake holder Introduce financial support initiatives to alleviate the economic strain on fatherless households. This may include scholarships, grants, or access to resources that facilitate educational success.
- iii. Government, community should foster community engagement to raise awareness about the challenges faced by fatherless students. Promote a supportive community environment that encourages empathy, understanding, and collaboration in addressing these issues.

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