



The Psychosocial Effects of Absentee Fathers on the Cognitive and Psychiatric Development of Boys in Jamaica: A Multidimensional Analysis

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Abstract

Father absence represents one of the most persistent yet under-examined psychosocial phenomena affecting child development in Jamaica. While global research links paternal absence to behavioural dysregulation, reduced academic achievement, and increased psychiatric vulnerability, limited scholarship has systematically examined its cognitive and psychiatric implications for Jamaican boys within their unique socio-historical and cultural context. Jamaica exhibits high rates of non-resident fathers, informal unions, and matrifocal family structures, yet the developmental consequences for male children remain insufficiently synthesised across psychological, sociological, and psychiatric domains. This study critically analyses the psychosocial effects of absentee fathers on the cognitive performance, emotional regulation, behavioural adjustment, and psychiatric vulnerability of boys in Jamaica. Drawing upon developmental psychology, attachment theory, social learning theory, and Caribbean family sociology, the present study integrates empirical findings from Jamaica and comparable post-colonial contexts. The evidence indicates that father absence is associated with reduced executive functioning, lower academic attainment, increased aggression, conduct disorders, depressive symptoms, substance misuse risk, and identity instability among boys. However, the magnitude of effects is mediated by maternal support, socioeconomic conditions, community engagement, and extended kin networks. The current study identifies critical gaps in Jamaican longitudinal psychiatric research and calls for culturally responsive interventions targeting early childhood development, male mentorship, and mental health screening. By synthesising interdisciplinary evidence, this study contributes to Caribbean scholarship on male development and provides policy-relevant recommendations for mitigating psychosocial risk among father-absent boys.

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Introduction

Family structure remains a foundational determinant of child development across psychological, educational, and psychiatric domains. In Jamaica, high rates of paternal non-residence, union instability, and visiting relationships have produced a significant proportion of boys raised without consistent paternal involvement [1,2]. While matrifocal family systems have long been recognised within Caribbean sociology, the cognitive and psychiatric implications for male offspring require more rigorous examination. International research suggests that father absence correlates with behavioural dysregulation, diminished academic performance, and increased psychiatric vulnerability [3-5]. However, the applicability of these findings to the Jamaican socio-cultural environment has not been comprehensively synthesised. This represents a critical gap in Caribbean scholarship on development and psychiatry.



Some Jamaican studies often examine delinquency, educational attainment, or crime outcomes independently rather than integrating cognitive and psychiatric dimensions within a unified framework [6,7]. Moreover, much of the literature treats father absence as a socioeconomic variable rather than as a relational and psychosocial construct. Few studies explicitly explore executive functioning, emotional regulation, identity formation, and psychiatric symptomatology concurrently. The absence of longitudinal psychiatric data further limits understanding of developmental trajectories among father-absent boys. Without such integration, policy responses risk oversimplification. A multidimensional analytical approach is therefore necessary.

This study advances three objectives. First, it examines the cognitive consequences of paternal absence among Jamaican boys, including academic achievement and executive functioning. Second, it analyses psychiatric outcomes such as anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, and substance vulnerability. Third, it identifies mediating and moderating variables, including maternal buffering, community mentorship, and socioeconomic status. By synthesising developmental psychology with Caribbean sociology, the study provides a culturally grounded interpretation of father absence. This integrative approach contributes to policy and clinical discourse within Jamaica and comparable post-colonial contexts.

Literature Review

International literature consistently associates father absence with adverse developmental outcomes. Boys raised without consistent paternal involvement exhibit increased behavioural problems, reduced impulse control, and heightened aggression compared with peers in two-parent households [3,4]. Cognitive outcomes include lower reading and mathematics achievement, diminished attention regulation, and weaker problem-solving capacity [5]. Psychiatric risks include elevated rates of depressive symptoms, conduct disorder, and substance experimentation during adolescence [8,9]. Neurodevelopmental research suggests that chronic stress exposure related to family instability may impair executive functioning and emotional regulation systems [10]. These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of paternal absence.

Caribbean scholarship introduces additional complexity. Jamaican family systems historically accommodate non-resident fathers within extended kin networks, complicating simplistic deficit narratives [1,2]. Some studies suggest that maternal grandmothers and community elders may partially compensate for paternal absence. However, boys often lack consistent male role modelling, which may affect gender identity formation and

behavioural regulation [6]. Research on Jamaican male delinquency highlights correlations between father absence, school disengagement, and gang affiliation [7]. Yet few studies explicitly connect these outcomes to psychiatric vulnerability.

Psychiatric literature indicates that boys are particularly sensitive to paternal modelling in developing emotional regulation and authority negotiation skills [8]. Absence of paternal structure may increase susceptibility to externalising disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. Internalising disorders, including depression and anxiety, may manifest differently, often masked by aggression or risk-taking behaviour [9]. Substance misuse risk is elevated among adolescents lacking paternal supervision and guidance [11]. These findings suggest that psychiatric outcomes may be gendered and culturally mediated.

Despite this body of evidence, Jamaican longitudinal psychiatric data remain limited. Cross-sectional studies dominate, restricting causal inference. Additionally, few studies examine cognitive outcomes and psychiatric symptoms within the same analytic framework. The interaction between socioeconomic deprivation and paternal absence requires further clarification. Consequently, a comprehensive synthesis tailored to the Jamaican context is warranted.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws primarily on attachment theory, which posits that early caregiver relationships shape emotional regulation and cognitive development [12]. Secure paternal attachment contributes to exploratory behaviour, risk assessment, and resilience in boys. Absence or inconsistent paternal involvement may disrupt attachment security, leading to behavioural dysregulation and emotional vulnerability. In Jamaican contexts, attachment dynamics may be influenced by migration, employment instability, and relational patterns. Attachment disruption thus represents a foundational mechanism linking father absence to developmental risk.

Social learning theory further explains behavioural modelling processes [13]. Boys often internalise behavioural norms, conflict resolution strategies, and masculine identity cues from paternal figures. In the absence of such modelling, peer groups or media representations may substitute as behavioural templates. This may increase exposure to maladaptive norms, including aggression or hypermasculinity. The interaction between peer reinforcement and limited paternal oversight may amplify behavioural risk. Social learning processes, therefore, mediate psychosocial outcomes.



Ecological systems theory contextualises these processes within broader socioeconomic and community environments [14]. Poverty, neighbourhood violence, and educational inequality may compound the effects of paternal absence. Conversely, supportive schools, churches, and mentorship programmes may buffer risk. The Jamaican socio-historical legacy of colonial labour migration also shapes paternal non-residence patterns. Developmental outcomes must therefore be analysed within layered ecological systems. This multidimensional framework strengthens explanatory coherence.

Masculinity and identity development theories provide additional insight. Boys construct self-concept through relational affirmation and gender modelling. Absentee fatherhood may generate identity ambiguity or overcompensation behaviours. Psychiatric vulnerability may emerge when identity formation lacks stable affirmation. Cultural narratives of masculinity within Jamaica further influence behavioural expression. Integrating these theories enables a nuanced interpretation of cognitive and psychiatric trajectories.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative conceptual-analytical design supported by systematic evidence synthesis of peer-reviewed literature, Jamaican national reports, psychiatric research, and Caribbean sociological scholarship. A conceptual design is appropriate given the limited longitudinal psychiatric datasets available in Jamaica and the need to integrate multidisciplinary findings into a coherent explanatory framework. Sources were identified through academic databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and regional Caribbean repositories. Inclusion criteria required empirical focus on father absence, paternal non-residence, or paternal disengagement and developmental outcomes among boys. Both Jamaican-specific studies and comparable post-colonial contexts were included where culturally relevant. Exclusion criteria eliminated studies lacking developmental or psychiatric measures.

Data extraction followed thematic coding procedures aligned with the theoretical framework. Coding domains included cognitive outcomes, academic performance, executive functioning, emotional regulation, externalising disorders, internalising disorders, substance vulnerability, identity development, and moderating variables. Jamaican demographic and family structure reports were analysed to contextualise prevalence patterns. Comparative international studies were synthesised to strengthen inferential depth while maintaining cultural specificity. Thematic clustering enabled the identification of recurring psychosocial patterns. This systematic approach enhanced conceptual transparency and analytical rigour.

To strengthen interpretive validity, findings were organised across

three analytic dimensions: cognitive development, psychiatric outcomes, and mediating ecological variables. Cross-study comparison allowed identification of consistent risk patterns and contextual divergences. Attention was given to socioeconomic status, maternal buffering, school engagement, and community mentorship as moderating factors. Particular emphasis was placed on distinguishing correlation from causation. The analysis avoided deficit-based assumptions and considered adaptive resilience pathways within Jamaican matrifocal systems. This balanced framework ensured culturally grounded interpretation.

Limitations include reliance on secondary data, cross-sectional dominance in Jamaican research, and heterogeneity of measurement tools. Psychiatric diagnoses were not uniformly operationalised across studies, limiting direct prevalence comparisons. Additionally, informal paternal contact may not be captured in binary resident/non-resident classifications. Rapid socio-economic changes may also influence evolving fatherhood patterns. Despite these limitations, triangulation across multiple disciplines provides robust conceptual validity. The methodology, therefore, offers a credible foundation for examining developmental trajectories among father-absent boys in Jamaica.

Findings

Cognitive Development Outcomes

Evidence indicates that father absence in Jamaica is associated with measurable cognitive and academic effects among boys. Boys raised without consistent paternal engagement demonstrate lower reading comprehension, weaker numeracy skills, and reduced sustained attention compared with peers in stable two-parent households [3,5,6]. Executive functioning deficits, particularly in impulse control and planning capacity, are recurrently reported in father-absent cohorts. Chronic household stress and economic strain may partially mediate these outcomes. However, where maternal educational attainment and extended kin support are strong, cognitive deficits appear attenuated. Table 1 summarises cognitive risk indicators.



Table 1: Cognitive Development Outcomes Among Father-Absent Boys.

Cognitive Domain	Observed Outcome	Mechanism	Moderating Factors	Key Sources
Reading achievement	Lower literacy performance	Reduced homework	Maternal education	35
Numeracy skills	Delayed mathematical	Limited academic	School quality	56
Executive functioning	Impulsivity, weak planning	Stress exposure	Mentorship	10
Attention regulation	Reduced sustained focus	Environmental instability	Structured schooling	35

Psychiatric and Behavioural Outcomes

Psychiatric vulnerability is more pronounced in externalising disorders among father-absent boys. Increased aggression, conduct disorder symptoms, and oppositional behaviours are consistently reported [8,9]. Internalising symptoms such as depression and anxiety are also present but often manifest through irritability or risk-taking behaviours. Substance experimentation risk rises during adolescence, particularly in urban settings with limited paternal supervision [11]. Identity instability and hypermasculine compensation behaviours have been observed in qualitative Caribbean studies [7]. Table 2 summarises psychiatric patterns.

Table 2: Psychiatric Outcomes Associated with Father Absence.

Psychiatric Domain	Observed Pattern	Risk Level	Mediating Variable	Key Sources
Conduct disorder	Elevated aggression	High	Peer influence	89
Depression	Masked depressive symptoms	Moderate	Emotional support	9
Anxiety	Behavioural dysregulation	Moderate	Household stress	8
Substance misuse	Increased experimentation	High	Community exposure	11

Ecological and Protective Factors

Father absence does not operate in isolation but interacts with ecological systems. Extended family networks, particularly maternal grandmothers, often provide emotional stability within Jamaican households [1,2]. School-based mentorship and church involvement serve as protective buffers. Socioeconomic deprivation, however, amplifies developmental risk. Urban violence exposure further compounds psychiatric vulnerability. Table 3 outlines mediating and protective variables.



Table 3: Ecological Moderators and Protective Factors.

Ecological Variable	Effect on Risk	Mechanism
Maternal education	Reduces cognitive deficit	Academic reinforcement
Extended kin support	Buffers emotional distress	Attachment substitution
School mentorship	Reduces delinquency	Male role modelling
Poverty	Amplifies psychiatric risk	Chronic stress
Community violence	Increases aggression	Trauma exposure

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that absentee fatherhood in Jamaica exerts a multidimensional influence on boys’ cognitive and psychiatric development, with effects observable across behavioural, emotional, and academic domains. International evidence consistently demonstrates that children raised in single-parent households face elevated risks of educational underachievement and psychosocial maladjustment [3,4]. Within the Jamaican context, these risks must be interpreted alongside long-standing family structures characterised by matrifocality and non-residential fatherhood [1,2]. While matrifocal systems have historically functioned as adaptive responses to economic instability, they do not eliminate developmental vulnerabilities associated with inconsistent paternal engagement. Boys in father-absent households may encounter reduced access to male modelling of behavioural regulation and problem-solving strategies. Executive functioning challenges, particularly in impulse control and sustained attention, are further intensified under conditions of socioeconomic strain [10]. Thus, cognitive outcomes emerge from the intersection of household structure and material deprivation rather than from paternal absence alone.

Psychiatric outcomes appear especially salient in the domain of externalising behaviours, including aggression, conduct problems, and early delinquency. Social learning theory suggests that children internalise behavioural norms through observation and reinforcement, making the absence of consistent paternal modelling potentially consequential for boys’ behavioural regulation [13]. Jamaican criminological research highlights the overrepresentation of young males in violent and antisocial activities, often linked to fragile male identity formation and limited supervision [7]. Substance use patterns similarly show associations with father absence, particularly during adolescence when peer influence intensifies [11]. However, internalising

disorders such as anxiety and depression may be underdiagnosed among Jamaican boys due to cultural norms surrounding masculinity and emotional restraint. Paternal mental health also plays a moderating role, as psychiatric disorders in fathers are associated with adverse child outcomes even when fathers are physically present [8,9]. Consequently, psychiatric risk must be understood as relational and contextual rather than purely structural.

The Jamaican socio-cultural environment complicates deficit-based interpretations of father absence. Foundational Caribbean scholarship illustrates that extended kin networks often assume caregiving, economic, and disciplinary roles traditionally associated with fathers [1,2]. Grandmothers, maternal uncles, and community elders frequently provide stability and supervision within matrifocal households. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory offers a useful lens for understanding how multiple environmental layers interact to shape developmental outcomes [14]. At the microsystem level, maternal warmth and consistent caregiving may buffer emotional insecurity. At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, schools, churches, and community organisations contribute protective influences. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that sustained paternal involvement uniquely enhances cognitive and emotional regulation outcomes beyond what extended kin support alone may provide [5]. The Jamaican context, therefore, reflects both resilience and residual vulnerability.

Attachment theory further illuminates the developmental implications of paternal absence. Secure attachments foster emotional regulation, stress resilience, and adaptive social functioning [12]. When paternal bonds are inconsistent or disrupted, boys may experience heightened stress reactivity and difficulties in identity consolidation. Adolescence, in particular, represents a critical period during which male role modelling



influences behavioural scripts and conceptions of masculinity. Brown and Chevannes document how Jamaican constructions of manhood are often negotiated in the absence of stable paternal figures, sometimes producing hypermasculine compensatory behaviours [6]. Such identity struggles may intersect with socioeconomic marginalisation, amplifying behavioural risk. Yet it is equally important to acknowledge heterogeneity, as many father-absent boys demonstrate resilience and academic competence. Developmental trajectories are therefore probabilistic rather than deterministic.

Structural poverty significantly intensifies the developmental impact of absentee fatherhood. Economic hardship constrains educational opportunities, increases parental stress, and exposes children to unsafe neighbourhood environments [10]. Evans and Kim demonstrate that chronic poverty impairs executive functioning through cumulative stress mechanisms [10]. In Jamaica, communities characterised by unemployment and concentrated disadvantage often experience elevated crime rates, further shaping male developmental pathways [7]. Father absence within such contexts may compound existing vulnerabilities rather than function as an isolated cause. Amato's analysis of family structure change emphasises that socioeconomic resources mediate many observed outcomes associated with single parenthood [4]. Accordingly, interventions must address structural inequality alongside family dynamics. A singular focus on paternal absence without socioeconomic reform risks oversimplification.

Despite these risks, paternal involvement remains a significant protective factor. Empirical evidence indicates that active father engagement is associated with improved cognitive development, social competence, and emotional regulation [5]. Even non-resident fathers who maintain consistent contact and financial support contribute positively to child well-being. Programmes that encourage responsible fatherhood and cooperative co-parenting may therefore yield measurable developmental benefits. Ramchandani and Psychogiou highlight the importance of supporting paternal mental health as part of family-based interventions [8]. Policies that reduce adversarial parental conflict and promote constructive engagement may mitigate psychiatric risk in boys. Strengthening father involvement should be framed as developmental enrichment rather than moral correction.

In conclusion, absentee fatherhood in Jamaica functions as a significant psychosocial determinant of boys' cognitive and psychiatric outcomes, but its effects are mediated by cultural, economic, and ecological factors. Executive functioning deficits and externalising behaviours appear most consistently associated with paternal absence, particularly under conditions of poverty and community instability. Extended kin networks and matrifocal

resilience moderate some adverse outcomes, demonstrating the adaptive capacity of Jamaican family systems. Nevertheless, sustained male modelling and secure paternal attachment offer distinctive developmental advantages that are not entirely substitutable. Effective policy responses must therefore integrate family support, poverty reduction, educational strengthening, and mental health screening. Stigmatising single-mother households would undermine culturally grounded resilience. A balanced, evidence-informed approach recognises both vulnerability and strength within Jamaica's complex familial landscape.

Policy Recommendations

Early childhood screening for executive functioning deficits among father-absent boys should be institutionalised within Jamaica's primary healthcare and early education systems. Routine developmental assessments conducted at well-child clinics and early childhood institutions can facilitate early identification of attentional dysregulation, working memory limitations, and impulse control difficulties. Early detection enables timely referral to school psychologists, behavioural therapists, and specialised educational support services. Integrating standardised cognitive screening tools into community health centres would also reduce disparities in access to developmental evaluation. Such proactive screening may prevent the consolidation of academic underachievement and behavioural disorders in later childhood. Importantly, these assessments must be culturally validated to reflect Jamaican social contexts and linguistic patterns. Early intervention constitutes a cost-effective strategy that mitigates long-term psychiatric and educational burdens.

The expansion of school-based male mentorship initiatives represents a second critical intervention. Structured mentorship programmes pairing boys with trained male role models can provide consistent guidance, emotional affirmation, and behavioural modelling. These initiatives may draw upon teachers, community leaders, faith-based mentors, and vetted volunteers to create sustainable relational networks. Research indicates that positive male attachment figures can enhance self-regulation, academic motivation, and pro-social identity development. Schools serve as ideal platforms for such programmes due to their daily contact with at-risk youth. Embedding mentorship within co-curricular activities such as sports, debating societies, and vocational clubs may further strengthen engagement. Institutional support from the Ministry of Education would ensure standardisation, accountability, and long-term sustainability.

Parenting education programmes that support non-resident father engagement should also be prioritised. Workshops and community seminars can equip fathers with communication skills, co-parenting strategies, and knowledge of child developmental



needs. Legal and social service frameworks should encourage responsible financial and emotional participation, even in cases of parental separation. Flexible visitation arrangements, mediation services, and father-inclusive school events may strengthen paternal bonds. Addressing economic barriers to involvement, such as unemployment and underemployment, is equally essential. Policies that integrate employment training with fatherhood responsibility initiatives may yield dual social benefits. Reinforcing positive father engagement reduces the psychosocial vacuum that often contributes to maladaptive behavioural patterns.

Community-based mental health screening in high-risk urban zones is another necessary strategy. Many father-absent boys reside in communities characterised by socioeconomic stress, violence exposure, and limited mental health infrastructure. Mobile clinics and school-linked counselling services can increase accessibility to psychological assessment and early treatment. Screening tools for depressive symptoms, conduct disorders, trauma exposure, and substance use risk should be integrated into routine community outreach. Collaboration between public health authorities, educational institutions, and local organisations would enhance service coordination. Early community-level detection reduces stigma by normalising mental health evaluation within familiar settings. Such decentralised approaches strengthen preventative psychiatry within vulnerable populations.

In addition, sustained research funding for longitudinal Jamaican psychiatric studies is essential. There remains a paucity of long-term, locally grounded data examining the developmental trajectories of father-absent boys across childhood and adolescence. Longitudinal research would clarify causal pathways, mediating variables, and protective mechanisms specific to the Jamaican sociocultural environment. Evidence-based policymaking requires robust empirical foundations rather than reliance on extrapolated international data. Funding partnerships between universities, government ministries, and international agencies could facilitate high-quality data collection. National datasets would also inform targeted resource allocation and intervention refinement. Investing in research enhances both scientific credibility and policy precision.

Finally, public campaigns promoting responsible father involvement should be implemented at a national level. Media initiatives can reshape cultural narratives by highlighting the developmental importance of engaged fatherhood. Radio, television, and social media platforms may be utilised to disseminate evidence-based messages on emotional presence, mentorship, and financial responsibility. Campaigns should avoid stigma and instead promote positive masculine identity linked to caregiving and protection. Collaboration with influential

community figures, athletes, and faith leaders could amplify impact. Normalising father engagement as a societal expectation fosters intergenerational behavioural change. Such cultural transformation complements clinical and institutional interventions by reinforcing supportive norms at the population level.

Conclusion

Absentee fatherhood in Jamaica constitutes a significant psychosocial determinant of cognitive and psychiatric development among boys. The absence of consistent paternal engagement often alters developmental trajectories during critical periods of emotional regulation, identity formation, and executive functioning. Boys growing up without active father involvement may experience diminished behavioural modelling, limited exposure to structured discipline, and reduced socio-emotional scaffolding. These developmental gaps can manifest in challenges with impulse control, sustained attention, and adaptive problem-solving. At a broader level, father absence intersects with socioeconomic stressors, community violence, and educational inequities, compounding vulnerability. Importantly, absentee fatherhood should not be interpreted as a singular causal determinant but rather as part of a complex ecological matrix influencing child outcomes. Recognising this multidimensional context allows for balanced scholarly interpretation and avoids deterministic assumptions.

Empirical patterns consistently indicate elevated risks of executive functioning deficits, academic underperformance, conduct disorders, depressive symptomatology, and early substance misuse among affected boys. Cognitive disruptions are particularly evident in domains of working memory, behavioural inhibition, and goal-directed planning, which are foundational for educational attainment. Psychiatric vulnerabilities often emerge during middle childhood and adolescence, when identity consolidation intensifies, and peer influence expands. Boys lacking paternal affirmation may exhibit externalising behaviours such as aggression or oppositional conduct, while others internalise distress through withdrawal or depressive features. The interplay between emotional insecurity and social marginalisation can heighten susceptibility to delinquent peer networks. Nevertheless, variability in outcomes underscores the presence of moderating and protective influences. Such heterogeneity highlights that father absence increases risk probability rather than predetermining pathology.

Protective factors within the Jamaican socio-cultural context significantly shape developmental resilience. Maternal warmth, structured caregiving, and consistent monitoring frequently buffer adverse psychological effects. Extended kinship networks, including grandparents, uncles, and community elders, often



provide surrogate mentorship and reinforce social norms. Faith-based organisations and school-based programmes contribute additional layers of psychosocial containment and moral guidance. Community engagement initiatives, particularly those centred on sport and skill development, foster self-efficacy and pro-social identity construction. These ecological supports illustrate the adaptive capacity embedded within Jamaican communal traditions. Consequently, any interpretation of absentee fatherhood must incorporate both vulnerability and resilience dynamics. Avoiding simplistic pathology narratives is essential to honour the cultural complexity of family systems in Jamaica.

Policy and clinical responses must therefore prioritise early screening, mentorship structures, and ecological strengthening strategies. Schools represent critical entry points for identifying cognitive or behavioural vulnerabilities before psychiatric symptoms consolidate. Community-based mentorship programmes that provide stable male role models can compensate for deficits in paternal modelling. Family-centred interventions should aim to enhance co-parenting communication, economic stability, and positive parenting practices. National strategies that support responsible fatherhood, employment access, and social inclusion may reduce structural drivers of paternal disengagement. Integrating mental health services into primary care and educational settings can further promote early intervention and stigma reduction. Strengthening male developmental pathways is not only a psychiatric imperative but also a national development priority that influences social stability, workforce readiness, and intergenerational well-being.

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