

Child work, care and neglect in farmworker homes: an empirical critique of Social Reproduction Theory

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Abstract

Purpose – This article empirically critiques Social Reproduction Theory by examining schoolchildren’s work in South African farmworker homes during employment hours and its relation to employment practices and residential conditions.

Design/methodology/approach – A longitudinal matched comparison case study design, with interview and observational data collected at three points over one year from 13 homes stratified by residence (farm vs. town) and employment (permanent vs. temporary). Thematic analysis and triangulation with social theoretical and contextual social policy and legislative data ensured rigour and robustness.

Findings – An average child care gap of 21.2 weekly hours in homes is identified: 24.72 (range: 20.33–29.67) for younger (ages 6–12) and 17.68 (range: 13.42–19.67) hours weekly for older (ages 13–17) schoolchildren. This corresponds with a legislated weekly gap between child education and adult employment ranging from 22.5 to 27.5 h, for older and younger schoolchildren respectively. This structures a social care deficit most acute for young schoolchildren and pervasive in townhomes, where state after-school childcare services are absent, resulting in a social state of child neglect. This social care deficit is shown to link to substantial risk: poor educational outcomes, teenage pregnancy, juvenile crime, child accidents, abuse, and kidnapping.

Research limitations/implications – Though the small sample limits statistical generalisability, the in-depth empirical inquiry provides rich, nuanced insights into the complex nexus of child work, care and neglect. This research design serves as a robust, replicable model for theory-building (Yin, 2018), enabling identification of critical empirical correlations and laying the groundwork for exploring additional local and global parallels and larger-scale research to further quantify findings.

Practical implications – Findings highlight targeted social policy and legislative interventions, beyond the recently enacted Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (Republic of South Africa, 2024), to align social employment and education work schedules to address the socio-structural care deficit.

Social implications – Findings offer foundational evidence directly relevant to social theory, policy and legislation to combat structural contributors to the social state of child neglect, and to mitigate social inequality and social risk across society.

Originality/value – This article pioneers empirical data on the nexus of labour, employment, work, care and neglect. It uniquely provides empirical evidence on the correlation between misaligned child education and adult employment work schedules structuring a social care deficit and associated social risk. It critiques SRT’s theoretico-political, adult-centric biases and contextual, conceptual and empirical gaps by grounding work in homes in material practices and conditions. It enhances SRT’s relevance to low-income contexts, social science and the sociology of work; and strengthens sociology’s contribution to social policy, legislation and critical social solutions.

Keywords Social Reproduction Theory, Farmworker homes, Child work, Child care, Child neglect

Paper type Research article

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1. Introduction

Almost as many town-dwelling temporary farmworkers cite leaving employment due to work on farms (48%) as in homes (52%) (Wiltshire, 2018). This highlights a tension overlooked by the sociology of work; particularly by Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), a social theory of work in homes.

Extensive research has probed farm employment and living conditions. Yet, work in farmworker homes represents a critical under-explored intersection of employment and work. One notable exception is Ally-Schmidt's unpublished master's thesis (2005), conducted at this study's site, on the child care of pre-school children in farmworker homes. This contextual gap is striking given the vulnerability of farmworkers, whose precarity entails significant economic risk from insecure temporary employment.

SRT posits unpaid work in homes as essential for sustaining the social economy by producing workers (Hopkins, 2017; Vogel, 2017). This occurs through 'second shifts' (Hochschild and Machung, 2012) and 'triple burdens' (Standing, 2001) of paid employment, unpaid work, and care work, which disproportionately affect low-income homes. However, despite SRT's valuable lens, this article argues SRT's adult-centricity and conceptualisation of 'self-care' child workers (Hochschild and Machung, 2012) lack empirical grounding. Furthermore, SRT's premises contradict international and national social policy and legislative conceptualisations of child 'care' and 'neglect'.

This article directly addresses SRT's contextual, conceptual and empirical gaps, by providing novel empirical data on the material practices and conditions of work by schoolchildren in homes during employment hours. Data derives from a longitudinal matched comparison case study on farmworkers in the Witzenberg Municipality, a key fruit-producing region in South Africa's Western Cape province.

This empirical article investigates two central questions: (1) How do employment practices and residential conditions influence work in farmworker homes? (2) What associated social risks emerge? By exploring these questions, this article empirically critiques SRT, shedding light on a pervasive social state of child neglect and its implications for society, social theory, policy and legislation.

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the critique of SRT in accord with policy and legislation on child 'care' and 'neglect'. Section 3 details the research design. Section 4 presents findings on farm employment, child work (morning and afternoon), associated social risks, and legislation structuring the social care deficit. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and legislative implications. Section 6 concludes with future directions. By addressing SRT limitations, this article advances SRT as a social scientific theory, strengthens the sociology of work and sociology's role in informing social policy, legislation and solutions.

2. Social Reproduction Theory: limitations and a path forward

SRT provides a theoretical framework for understanding work in homes (Hopkins, 2017; Vogel, 2017). Its development, rooted in the Marxist Feminist domestic labour debate, occurred alongside labour studies. Emerging during the late 20th-century neoliberal shift, when research increasingly focused on identity, language, and culture (Vogel, 2014), SRT expanded the focus on work beyond employment to include activities in homes. This theory is pertinent for exploring social issues like town-dwelling temporary farmworkers citing work in homes (52%) as a reason for leaving employment, almost as frequently as work on farms (48%) (Wiltshire, 2018).

SRT's strength is its goal to develop a unified social theory of work inclusive of work in homes (Vogel, 2014). It highlights how neo-liberal policies, such as reduced public spending on social services, exacerbate work in homes. This, exemplified by the 'feminisation of work' (Standing, 1999) which intensifies low-wage, static, flexible and informal employment, with women 'triply burdened' by employment, work, and care of children and the elderly (Standing, 2001). This manifests as 'second shifts' (Hochschild and Machung, 2012),

particularly severe where state and/or market services are absent. Even when outsourcing is affordable, SRT identifies disproportionate ‘care drains’ from low-income homes (Isaksen *et al.*, 2008). A key contribution is SRT’s emphasis on ‘care gaps’ (Fraser, 2014) and service delivery failures, resulting in social ‘care deficits’ (Hochschild, 2004). These deficits are especially pronounced for poorly paid, less educated, migrants, and/or those contending racial, ethnic (Davis, 1981; Isaksen *et al.*, 2008) and other social inequalities. However, SRT’s adult-centric bias and underdeveloped application to low-income contexts, like farmworker homes where individuals disproportionately experience a social care deficit and associated care gaps, significantly limits SRT’s explanatory power.

Despite its potential, SRT remains limited due to several critical weaknesses. Foremost is its absence of a unified framework. Drawing from diverse disciplines—sociology, anthropology, labour studies, economics, philosophy, and geography—SRT forms no “unified political or theoretical tradition” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 13). However, this lack of a unified tradition is paradoxically accompanied by an overarching concern with “one particular aspect of ... capitalist reproduction” and “the reproduction of the capitalist production cycle as a whole” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 13). This shared focus on capitalist reproduction engenders a theoretico-political bias and contributes to a fragmented understanding of work in homes and the sociology of work.

Furthermore, SRT limitations are compounded by conceptual ambiguity. A primary critique is its expansive scope of ‘social reproduction’. Academics like Folbre (2006) argue its breadth – potentially including any activity sustaining life – renders it too vague for rigorous scientific analysis. This concern resonates in agrarian studies where this SRT conceptualisation is deemed “bewilderingly vast” (Cousins *et al.*, 2018), complicating empirical operationalisation.

Moreover, SRT conceptualisations of ‘work’ lack consensus. Social reproductive ‘labour’ underscores workers as pre-constituted commodities (Bhattacharya, 2017; Oran, 2017), emphasising duress akin to Hochschild’s ‘emotional labour’ (1983). Further, ‘work’ focuses on affective, emotional, and relational aspects exemplified by ‘care work’. However, SRT’s narrow focus on Folbre’s (2006) ‘direct care’ work as strictly interpersonal “feelings of affection and responsibility combined with actions that provide responsibly for an individual’s personal needs” (Cancian and Oliker, 2000, p. 2), sidelines ‘indirect’, non-interpersonal ‘work’. This, engendered in the sociologies of family and gender (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004), conceptually weakens SRT’s social scientific potential.

Additionally, SRT analyses of children underscore a contextual gap. While SRT has explored child work in schools (Ferguson, 2017), pre-schools (Newberry, 2014; Rosen and Newberry, 2022) and labour on farms (Levine, 2013), analyses of child work in homes remain nascent and reliant on adjacent fields like Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF) and Childhood Studies (Rosen and Newberry, 2018). Although SRT presents empirical data on child care of pre-school children (Ally-Schmidt, 2005; Hochschild and Machung, 2012), there is a clear absence of data on schoolchildren’s work in homes.

Despite this empirical lacuna, Hochschild and Machung (2012) advocate for conceptualising children as ‘self-care’ workers, framing this as an empowering contrast to the child neglect implied by ‘latchkey children’ (Long and Long, 1981). Critiquing the latchkey concept as suggesting “sad and deprived” children, they prefer “self-care” for denoting “a happy superkid” (Hochschild and Machung, 2012, p. 174). However, their data evidences “younger children, none of whom were in ‘self-care’” (Hochschild and Machung, 2012, p. 174). This indicates SRT’s conceptualisation of ‘self-care’ child workers is an optimistic, value-driven concept lacking empirical grounding. In response, this article conceptualises work as material practice and activity bound by place and time (Webster *et al.*, 2003) and, crucially, including all persons.

More importantly, SRT’s ‘self-care’ concept directly contradicts the social policy and legislative context. Internationally and nationally, children’s ‘care’ is predicated on physical adult presence. International treaties mandate, unless emancipated, children must be under the direct supervision of primary caregivers, proxy caregivers, or the de facto care of the State

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011). A failure of adult “care” constitutes “physical neglect”, including when children are with other children or teenage parents (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011, p. 9). Such international policy principles are adopted by United Nations (UN) signatory countries, including South Africa, and are enacted in local legislation such as the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 1996, 2005). Nationally, the South African Department of Social Development conceptualises child neglect as a “lack of adequate substitute care during the temporary absence of parents”, noting its association with low-income contexts (2019, p. 26). Therefore, SRT’s ‘self-care’ concept is not only empirically unsubstantiated but also fails to integrate the social policy and legislative conceptualisation of child ‘care’ and the social necessity for adult supervision and protection.

SRT theorists like Leach (2016) argue SRT abstracts from specific social relations, favouring ideals over empirical data – a flaw Political Marxist Samuel Knafo critiques as “abstracting ideal types or formal models” rather than specifying social reality (2007, p. 100). This aligns with Leach (2016) and Ferguson’s (2017) call to abandon SRT for SRF, and others’ support for a “theoretico-political” Theory of Social Reproduction (Rocha *et al.*, 2025, p. 4). This perspective is contested by SRT theorists like Bhattacharya (2017) and McNally (2017), who instead encourage developing SRT into a rigorous social scientific theory by employing a dialectical materialist methodology. However, lacking grounding in the material practices and conditions of work in homes, SRT has yet to adequately move beyond theoretico-political ideals to strengthen itself empirically into a social scientific theory.

This article addresses these shortcomings by empirically testing SRT against data on schoolchildren in South African farmworker homes. Thereby broadening its scope to include all persons, advancing SRT’s goal to develop a unified theory of work (Vogel, 2014) and strengthening the social scientific study of the sociology of work.

3. Research design

The research aimed for an in-depth empirical exploratory inquiry into work in farmworker homes. Employing a qualitative comparative approach (Yin, 2018), the study delved into the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ of work, enabling the uncovering of rich, situated detail and nuanced realities beyond surface-level quantitative surveys (Patton, 2015).

The longitudinal matched comparison case study was designed to capture naturally occurring variations in farmwork conditions (farm-vs. town-based residences) and practices (permanent vs. temporary employment). This quasi-experimental cross-sectional design employs a comparative method consistent with a dialectical materialist methodology, and which suits small, qualitative samples and enables robust cross-case and within-case analyses (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Yin, 2018). Data collection spanned one year (October 2016 to September 2017), with interviews and observations conducted at three critical points: pre-season (late October/early November), season (mid-January/early March), and post-season (late August/early September), as per farm participant availability (Figure 1).

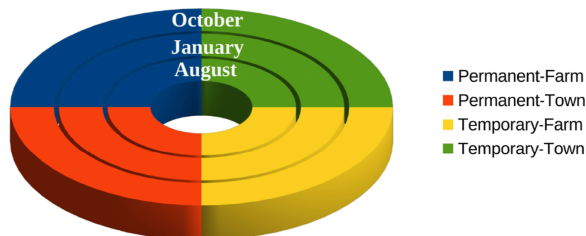


Figure 1. Longitudinal matched comparison design. Source: Author’s own work

Participants were selected via stratified quota sampling across three commercial farms – Boulder Valley, Southend, and Meadow Grove – accessed through a local skills training organisation to minimise gatekeeper bias. Farm managers identified four women per stratum, from which one was randomly selected, and reserves kept for attrition. Southend Farm offers permanent employment to temporary workers who are extended housing. Consequently, an additional temporary townhome was included to maintain farm stratum sample balance. Further, a single instance of mid-study attrition (Nombulela, Permanent-Townhome) expanded the initial sample from 12 to 13 homes (Anelise, Permanent-Townhome) (Table 1). Potential substitution bias was mitigated by the stratified quota sampling design, which ensured balanced representation across strata.

For ethical rigour, pseudonyms ensured confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy for participants and farms. Informed consent was obtained before participation and maintained throughout the study.

Data collection unfolded in two phases. Initial workplace interviews gathered background details (e.g. employment, home and family characteristics). Subsequently, home interview visits during employment hours captured work dynamics in homes, including child work activities. An ethnographic approach – researcher participation in daily routines – yielded observations of unanticipated events (e.g. school dismissals, truancy), revealing care gaps not evident through interviews alone. Data were audio-recorded and supplemented by verbatim notes, field notes, and observations. Reflexivity addressed researcher outsider status, its potential bias was mitigated by cross-checking interview transcripts with field notes and participants.

The exploratory nature of the research necessitated a thematic analytical approach (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Systematic categorisation identified broad themes (e.g. workers, hours, activities) and sub-themes (e.g. social risk). Visual diagrams mapped homesteads, homes, and families. Data were also classified into summative tables by home, time, person and activity, enabling quantitative representation for pattern identification and comparison.

Constant comparison across cases and time points ensured robust findings, aligning with qualitative rigour (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Inductive analysis revealed surprising schoolchild work patterns, prompting abductive re-analysis (Reichert, 2014). Triangulation with social theory, policy, and legislative data further strengthened credibility (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) and solidified themes like ‘child neglect’. Data analysis was conducted iteratively until the empirical inquiry addressed the research problem of work in farmworker homes during employment hours. While demographic data (e.g. age, gender, education level, race, ethnicity) and household data (e.g. size and composition) were collected, no significant differences were observed across these individual characteristics on work in homes; thus, this article prioritises analysis of structural determinants of work in homes (residential conditions, employment types, age-related work dynamics).

This study’s qualitative, case-specific longitudinal design, with its small 13-participant sample, intentionally forgoes statistical generalisability for in-depth empirical inquiry and

Table 1. Sampling frame

Employment and residence	Boulder Valley	Southend	Meadow Grove
Permanent-Farmhome	Alice	Shantelle	Rosebella
Permanent-Townhome	Anelise and Nombulela	Charlotte	Michelle
Temporary-Farmhome	Leticia	–	Jessica
Temporary-Townhome	Bongiwe	Candice and Thumeka	Francis

Source(s): Author’s own work

nanced insights. This approach supports robust theory-building (Yin, 2018), specifically for refining SRT into a social scientific theory and advancing the sociology of work. Furthermore, the design provides a strong empirical foundation for a replicable model for future studies.

This multi-layered approach enhanced empirical rigour by ensuring data were “treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to ‘the concept of the family’” (Marx, 1932, p. 49) nor to SRT’s theoretico-political, adult-centric biases. By grounding SRT in empirical data, this article refines its theoretical, contextual, conceptual, and empirical gaps, and contributes to social science, particularly the sociology of work, social policy and legislative solutions.

4. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings on work in South African farmworker homes during employment hours. The data reveal a significant social care deficit resulting from misaligned child education and adult employment work schedules which, particularly pervasive in townhomes, culminate in a social state of child neglect. These findings illuminate pronounced socio-structural inequalities and social risk, and provide the empirical basis for critically engaging SRT.

The analysis unfolds in five parts: farmwork practices and residential conditions (Section 4.1), morning (Section 4.2) and afternoon child care gaps (Section 4.3), associated social risks (Section 4.4), and legislation structuring the social care deficit (Section 4.5).

4.1 Farmwork employment dynamics

Farmwork employment is shaped by legislative frameworks, (seasonal) overtime, workplace settings, employment types (general and specialised) and contracts, and weather patterns. These factors structure work days and lengths, directly influencing adult presence in homes, and consequently, child care and potential child neglect.

South African employment hours are regulated by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (Department of Labour, 1997), stipulating a standard 45-h work week (five days, plus 10 h overtime, excluding breaks). Sectoral agreement allows an additional day and 15 h of seasonal overtime for four months annually in agriculture (Department of Labour, 2006). Crucially, seasonal overtime, peaking from mid-November to mid-March (harvest), extends work days and hours.

Workplace settings further amplify variability. Outdoor tasks like pruning and harvesting are structured by daylight, with farmwork hours commencing earlier in season. Standard operations from 08:00–17:30 shift to 07:00–17:30, or 07:30–17:00 to 07:00–18:30 at Southend, usually finishing 16:30 Fridays, plus alternative seasonal Saturdays until 15:30. Conversely, indoor workplaces (packhouses) maintain uniform starts under artificial lighting, terminating later in season: 07:00–18:00 shifting to 07:00–19:00, usually finishing 16:30 Fridays, plus alternative seasonal Saturdays until 12:30. Depending on seasonal demand, all Saturdays may be worked.

Employment contracts introduce further divergence. At Boulder Valley, permanent workers begin earlier (06:00-seasonal, 07:00-standard starts) than temporary counterparts (07:00-seasonal, 08:00-standard starts), while Southend and Meadow Grove maintain uniform starts across employment contracts.

Additionally, in contrast to general workers, specialist workers experience non-standard hours. For example, Alice’s husband (Farmhome-Permanent) as driver departs at 05:20 returning at 18:45. Michelle (Townhome-Permanent), a pest controller, sometimes works until 23:00. Similarly, Jessica’s husband (Farmhome-Permanent), an irrigation specialist, sometimes leaves early (03:00) or works late (23:30).

Moreover, weather significantly disrupts outdoor work. As Francis (Townhome-Temporary) noted, “Rainy days are difficult”, resulting in unpaid downtime for temporary employees.

These multifaceted employment patterns collectively create significant care gaps by extending employment far beyond educational hours (Section 4.5). Thereby, establishing conditions for child care, neglect and social risk (Section 4.4). This detailed examination of employment variability highlights the implications for work in homes, detailed in the following subsections contrasting farmhouse and townhome care gaps in mornings (Section 4.2) and afternoons (Section 4.3).

4.2 Morning child care gaps

Mornings reveal work dynamics shaped by geographical location, education and employment schedules. With farmwork typically beginning between 06:00 and 08:00 and schools commencing at 08:00 year-round (gates opening from 07:30), significant care gaps emerge.

In farmhomes (Table 2) care gaps are partially mitigated by commuting distances and transport services, though challenges persist. Schoolchildren generally depart for school before adults. For instance, Rosebella transported her 12-year-old daughter to farm bus at 06:15 before her 06:30-seasonal and 07:30-standard departure. Similarly, Jessica transported her son to farm school bus at 06:15 before her 06:45-seasonal and 07:45-standard departure, ensuring his child care.

Nevertheless, quantifiable care gaps are evident in farmhomes. Alice’s 15-year-old son, for example, was seasonally unsupervised at home from 05:45–06:15 when she started farmwork at 06:00 seasonally (07:00-standard-start). Year-round Shantelle transported her 6-year-old son to the town school bus at 06:30 where he waited unsupervised until “the school bus leaves at 07:30” (Shantelle, Farmhome-Permanent). Leticia’s situation mirrors this. She transported her 3-year-old to farm pre-school before her 06:20-seasonal and 07:20-standard departure. However, her 10-year-old, who walked to an on-farm primary school, was alone from 06:20–07:30 seasonally. This instance illustrates how, in contrast to fixed schooling hours, the extended operating hours at farm pre-schools mitigate morning child care gaps in farmhomes.

In stark contrast, townhomes present more pervasive care gaps (Table 3). Town-dwelling farmworkers face longer commutes because the geographical location of townhomes, while closer to schools, is further from farms, resulting in adults typically departing first. Charlotte’s 14-year-old son departed at 07:00, after her 06:30-seasonal exit (07:00-standard), with his transport unsupervised even with standard hours. Michelle transported her daughters to the town school bus at 07:15 before her 07:30-standard departure, but both daughters (6, 13) were unsupervised after Michelle’s 06:30-seasonal departure. Anelise’s five sons (8–17) departed for school after her 05:45-seasonal and 06:15-standard exit. After Thumeka’s 06:30-seasonal departure (07:00-standard) her 12-year-old son received care when her sister was unemployed: “my sister walks him to school at 07:00, if she’s not working” (Townhome-Temporary).

Table 2. Farmhome mornings

Person	Age	Schooling	Care gap	
			Seasonal-hours	Standard-hours
Rosebella’s Daughter	12	Town Primary-School and Farm After-School	None	None
Leticia’s Daughter	3	Farm Pre-School	None	None
Leticia’s Son	10	Farm Primary-School and Farm After-School	06:20–07:30	07:20–07:30
Jessica’s Son	6	Town Primary-School and Farm After-School	None	None
Alice’s Son	15	Town Secondary-School	05:45–06:15	None
Shantelle’s Son	6	Town Primary-School	06:30–07:30	06:30–07:30

Source(s): Author’s own work

Table 3. Townhome mornings

Person	Age	Schooling	Care gap Seasonal-hours	Standard-hours
Charlotte's Son	14	Town Secondary-School	06:30–07:30	07:00–07:30
Michelle's Daughters	6	Town Primary-School	06:30–07:15	None
	13	Town Secondary-School	06:30–07:15	None
Anelise's Sons	8	Town Primary-School	05:45–07:30	06:15–07:30
	9	Town Primary-School	05:45–07:30	06:15–07:30
	13	Town Secondary-School	05:45–07:30	06:15–07:30
	15	Town Secondary-School	05:45–07:30	06:15–07:30
	17	Town Secondary-School	05:45–07:30	06:15–07:30
Thumeka's Son	12	Town Primary-School	06:30–07:30	07:00–07:30
Francis' Daughters	3	Farm Pre-School	None	None
	11	Town Primary-School	06:15–07:30	07:15–07:30
	16	School-Dropout	06:15–18:00	07:15–18:00

Source(s): Author's own work

Francis left home with her pre-school daughter (3) at her 06:15-seasonal and 07:15-standard exit for farm pre-school before work. However, in season, “when I leave, I wake the other daughters” (11, 16) to ready and transport themselves to school” (Francis, Townhome-Temporary), highlighting how extended farm pre-school hours mitigate child neglect in townhomes.

These periods of unsupervised ‘self-care’ highlight daily care gaps due to misaligned adult employment and child education schedules, demonstrating that, even in farmhomes, the balance of early morning schedules can create morning child care gaps. Standard employment hours, longer schoolchild commutes compared to farmworkers and extended farm pre-school operating hours mitigate early morning care gaps. Conversely, seasonal employment hours, shorter schoolchild commutes compared to farmworkers and fixed school operating hours contribute to child care gaps in homes. Adults attempt to mitigate these gaps by encouraging school attendance from 07:30, when school gates open, before lessons commence at 08:00. This, however, does not guarantee care, as evidenced by Anelise’s (Townhome-Permanent) observation of her eldest child’s truancy: “He goes Mondays, and Wednesdays if he decides to go”. Thus, morning child care gaps structure child neglect in homes.

4.3 Afternoon child care gaps

Schoolchildren return home between 13:25–15:00 while farmworkers return between 17:30–18:15, or 17:45–19:00 in season. This creates immediate and prolonged care gaps, indicative of a structural imbalance in the provision of socially necessary child care, resulting in a foundational social care deficit. Disparities are particularly pronounced in the afternoons, disproportionately affecting townhomes.

While farmhomes generally benefit from after-school services which align with children’s dismissal times, care gaps can nevertheless emerge (Table 4). Such gaps stem from irregular school operating hours, social perceptions of child care and voluntary after-school childcare attendance. For instance, Rosebella’s daughter experienced three weeks of neglect at end of term due to school dismissals during exam periods: “they’ll be at home . . . while the teachers are busy with the reports” (Permanent-Farmhome). This demonstrates how even with access to childcare services, unforeseen school schedule changes disrupt care arrangements and lead to child neglect in homes.

Table 4. Farmhome afternoons

Person	Age	Schooling	Care gaps	
			Seasonal-hours	Standard-hours
Rosebella's Daughter	12	Town Primary-School and Farm After-School	None	None
Leticia's Daughter	3	Farm Pre-School	06:30–18:00 (school term end)	None
Leticia's Son	10	Farm Primary-School and Farm After-School	None	None
Jessica's Son	6	Town Primary-School and Farm After-School	None	None
Alice's Son	15	Town Secondary-School	15:00–17:45	15:00–17:45
Shantelle's Son	6	Town Primary-School	13:30–18:15	13:30–19:15

Source(s): Author's own work

Moreover, Alice's 15-year-old son no longer attended farm after-school due to perceived age-appropriateness: "he's turning 17 at the end of the year"—Farmhome-Permanent). This highlights a conflict between social perceptions of maturity and policy and legislative mandates for child care.

Furthermore, voluntary after-school attendance burden children with 'self-care' work. Shantelle, for example, opted out of employing an informal childcarer when her 6-year-old son enrolled in primary school. Arriving home alone at 13:30, he 'self-cared' until Shantelle's 17-year-old brother returned from school at 15:00, leaving both children in a state of neglect until Michelle and her mother's 18:15-standard and 19:15-seasonal return to their respective homes. Child care was only provided during Shantelle's 22-year-old sister's two-month unemployment (August–September), a temporary packhouse worker, and in exchange for nappies.

Schoolchildren in townhomes experience significant neglect due to the acute lack of state childcare services in town. Moreover, no town-dwelling children utilised farm-based after-school services. Further, only one townhome had adult presence year-round and that too in respect to pre-school children. Candice provided childcare at home for her and her sisters' pre-school children during her two-month unemployment (August–September), relieving her 53-year-old mother to earn income as informal childcare worker. However, the remaining townhomes experienced partial or complete adult absence, burdening schoolchildren with 'self-care' and 'direct care' work of younger children. Analysis of child return patterns reveal clear age-based distinctions (Table 5).

The first to return home are the youngest schoolchildren. Michelle's 6-year-old daughter returned at 13:25, unsupervised until her elder sister's 15:00 return. Similarly, Anelise's 8-year-old son arrived home on foot at 13:00, alone for about 45 min before his first sibling's return.

Slightly older children, such as Anelise's 9-year-old son, Francis' 11-year-old daughter and Thumeka's 12-year-old son, arrive home around 14:00. Thumeka's son was alone until 15:00, when his 17-year-old uncle, who attended a special needs primary school and lived with his permanently employed father, returned to supervise him until their respective parents' 17:30-standard and 19:00-seasonal returns. When unemployed, Thumeka's sister transported the children from school and provided child care. Francis' 11-year-old daughter similarly travelled home alone, relying on her 16-year-old sister to fill the care gap until Francis' 18:00-standard year-round return. However, by January her sister had moved out, leaving Francis' 11-year-old neglected and alone.

The last to return home are the eldest schoolchildren: Michelle's 13-year-old daughter, Anelise's 13-, 16-, and 17-year-old sons, and Charlotte's 14-year-old son, all returning around 15:00. Without socially necessary child care, Charlotte relied on telephonic supervision until her 17:30-standard and 19:00-seasonal return: "That's why he has a cell phone. When school finishes, I call him" (Townhome-Permanent). Anelise explained: "The older ones . . . they look

Table 5. Townhome afternoons

Person	Age	Schooling	Care gaps		
			Age 6–8	Age 9–12	Age 13–17
Michelle's	6	Town Primary-School	13:25–18:00	–	–
Daughters	13	Town Secondary-School	–	–	15:00–18:00
Anelise's Sons	8	Town Primary-School	13:00–18:00	–	–
	9	Town Primary-School	–	13:45–18:00	–
	13	Town Secondary-School	–	–	15:00–18:00
	15	Town Secondary-School	–	–	15:00–18:00
	17	Town Secondary-School	–	–	15:00–18:00
Francis' Daughters	3	Farm Pre-School	None	None	None
	11	Town Primary-School	–	13:45–18:00	–
	16	School Dropout	07:15–18:00	–	–
Thumeka's Son	12	Town Primary-School	–	14:00–17:30	–
				(–19:00)	–
Charlotte's Son	14	Town Secondary-School	–	–	15:00–17:30 (–19:00)

Source(s): Author's own work

after each other” (Townhome-Permanent). Anelise's 17-year-old son ‘cared’ for his four younger brothers until her 18:00 standard year-round return. However, when her eldest dropped out of school altogether post-season for farmwork, Anelise encouraged her youngest son to “go to bed and sleep . . . that is the best you can do” (Townhome-Permanent), reflecting the reality of neglect. Michelle's daughter's expressed preference not to attend farm after-school (“she doesn't want to . . . she wants to sit at home and does her homework and watches TV”—Michelle, Townhome-Permanent) meant she relied solely on nearby family and neighbours as emergency contacts. Michelle's case starkly illustrates how the absence of formal after-school services in townhomes, combined with voluntary attendance, individual preferences, education and employment schedules, result in significant and prolonged periods of child unsupervised time and neglect.

The findings (Tables 2 to 5) collectively demonstrate how misaligned work schedules in employment and education structure social care deficits and schedule care gaps in (farm and town) homes. While morning gaps vary seasonally, afternoon gaps persist year-round, particularly exacerbated in townhomes due to absent after-school childcare services. Even in farmhomes, where after-school services align with education and employment dismissal times, care gaps emerge due to factors like irregular school operating hours, voluntary after-school attendance and social perceptions conflicting with policy and legislative mandates for child care. Consequently, neglected schoolchildren are burdened with ‘self-care’ and ‘direct care’ work in homes and associated social risks.

4.4 Consequences of care gaps: social risk

Social risks increase significantly for neglected children, well-documented in ‘latchkey’ literature. While unsupervised periods under three hours may not necessarily pose immediate risk for ages 13 and above, risks demonstrably escalate beyond these thresholds (Mertens *et al.*, 2003).

Quantifying morning and afternoon care gaps, this study found an annual average care gap of 21.2 weekly hours: 17.68 (range: 13.42–19.67) for older (ages 13–17) and 24.72 (range: 20.33–29.67) for younger (ages 6–12) schoolchildren. Exceeding three hours daily neglect, this indicates a significant escalation of risk and extreme risk for younger schoolchildren (Mertens *et al.*, 2003). Further, townhome schoolchildren experienced pervasive risk.

Young schoolchildren (ages 6–12) experience average weekly 23.61-hour-standard (range: 19–29) and 26.94-hour-seasonal (range: 23–31) care gaps. In farmhomes, Leticia's son (6)

experienced a weekly 4.68-hour-seasonal care gap, and Shantelle's son (6) a 26.25-hour-standard and 30.25-hour-seasonal gap. However, in townhomes, Michelle's daughter (6) experienced weekly 21.9-hour-standard and 24.9-hour-seasonal gaps; Anelise's 8-year-old son 29-hour-standard and 31-hour-seasonal gaps, her 9-year-old son 25.25-hour-standard and 27.25-hour-seasonal gaps; Francis' daughter (11) 20.5-hour-standard and 25.5-hour-seasonal gaps; and Thumeka's son (12) 19-hour-standard and 23-hour-seasonal weekly care gaps.

Older children (ages 13–17) experience average weekly 16.63-hour-standard (range: 12.75–19) and 19.79-hour-seasonal (range: 14.75–24) care gaps, whilst some assume direct child 'care' work of younger children. In farmhomes, Alice's son (16) experienced weekly 12.75-hour-standard and 14.75-hour-seasonal care gaps. However, in townhomes, Charlotte's son (14) experienced weekly 16-hour-standard and 24-hour-seasonal gaps; Michelle's 13-year-old daughter 14-hour-standard and 17-hour-seasonal gaps; Anelise's 13-, 15- and 17-year-old son's 19-hour-standard and 21-hour-seasonal gaps.

Children not attending school experienced the most intensive weekly care gaps: 53.25-hour-standard and 58.25-hour-seasonal gaps for Francis' 16-year-old daughter who dropped out of school; 58.25-hour-standard and 59.75-hour-seasonal gaps for Anelise's 17-year-old son who was regularly truant; and a 56.5-hour-seasonal gap for Rosebella's daughter (12) when dismissed before legislated educational school holiday schedules.

Ultimately, schoolchildren who are younger (ages 6–12) and live in townhomes experience disproportionate care gaps and states of neglect, when compared to older and farmhome schoolchildren. Averages and ranges exclude Leticia's son as outlier. Further, although these figures account for shorter Friday employment hours, they do not account for school holidays coinciding with seasonal employment hours. Further, they exclude Saturdays which alone increase care gaps by 6.5 and 10 h weekly, for indoor and outdoor farmworker homes respectively. Additionally, these pertain to general farmworker hours, excluding the non-standard hours of specialist farmworkers like Michelle, and Jessica and Alice's husbands. Thus, school holidays, seasonal Saturdays and non-standard hours escalate social risk.

Beyond the quantifiable care gaps, this study reveals five qualitative social risks pervasive across townhomes. First, educational performance is significantly jeopardised. While farm after-schools offer professional child care and supplemental curricula, townhome children lack such services. Schools attempt to mitigate the social deficit, and resultant neglect, by communicating with parents about absenteeism, incomplete homework, and/or missing school materials. However, delayed school interventions—by “two or three weeks” (Francis, Townhome-Temporary)—mean parents are not timeously informed. Without adequate services, the ‘double shift’ of work in schools and homes falls on neglected children. Research consistently links parental involvement and after-school services to improved educational outcomes (Cosden *et al.*, 2004; Jordan and Nettles, 2000; Nelson *et al.*, 2005; Wernholm and Ackesjö, 2025), and neglect demonstrably harms school performance (Belle, 1999).

Second, neglected children are vulnerable to early sexual involvement and teenage pregnancy (Eberstadt, 2001; Mendonca *et al.*, 2020). Francis's 16-year-old daughter's truancy, for instance, preceded her teenage pregnancy, severely straining Francis' limited resources (Townhome-Temporary). This resulted in her daughter establishing a home mid-season on her boyfriend's family homestead, highlighting the risk of unsupervised adolescent schoolchildren.

Third, unsupervised periods directly contribute to increased juvenile delinquency and crime. Charlotte's home was burgled by “a boy and a girl” (Townhome-Permanent) connected to a spate of burglaries, occurring when her son was at school and both she and her daughter worked seasonal hours. This incident demonstrates the vulnerability of neglected children and the propensity for juvenile crime during employment hours. While South African statistics are limited, studies show an association between lack of child care and delinquency. American data highlights juvenile crime peaks in the afternoons between 15:00–19:00 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999), consistent with research indicating after-school programs serve as “protective factor” in crime prevention (Wernholm and Ackesjö, 2025, p. 67).

Fourth, the risk of accidents and injuries, particularly fires, is significantly heightened. Bongiwe's neighbour's neglected child inadvertently started a fire while cooking, destroying numerous informal homes and forcing Bongiwe and her sister to relocate in season (Townhome-Temporary). This risk is especially acute in town where, in contrast to formal farmhomes, only three homes (Nombulela, Candice and Michelle) were formal homes. Engels (1892) extensively documented children's susceptibility to home accidents, with recent studies confirming unsupervised children face increased risk of accidents, injuries, fires, and other emergencies (Heymann, 2006; Vandivere *et al.*, 2003; Venter and Rambau, 2011).

Fifth, sexual abuse and kidnapping present threats to neglected children. Francis' partner was in jail for "child rape" (Townhome-Temporary) and Nombulela's husband for kidnapping: "he caught children" (Townhome-Permanent). These crimes occurred during employment hours. Francis stated, "I wasn't at home" (Townhome-Temporary), and Nombulela, "I was at work, I didn't know" (Townhome-Permanent). Studies consistently find increased risk of sexual abuse for unsupervised children (Dahlblom *et al.*, 2009). South African data specifically highlights child neglect in homes and abuse by persons outside homes as key risk factors (Cole, 1995; Larsen *et al.*, 1998).

Beyond these empirical findings, literature documents child neglect significantly increases risk of long-term developmental (Vandivere *et al.*, 2003) and behavioural issues, lowered self-esteem, heightened depression and increased substance abuse (Mertens *et al.*, 2003).

Recognising this social state of child neglect, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) attempt to support at-risk children by addressing social challenges such as "lack of early child development support, food insecurity, gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout" (Erzse *et al.*, 2024, p. 5). NGO and farm after-school childcare services are subsidised by the Department of Social Development, which itself acknowledges the strong association between poverty, single-parent homes, and childcare service deficits with increased child neglect, abuse and developmental delays (Department of Social Development, 2019). Nevertheless, while farmhomes benefit from extended farm pre-school hours and after-school services, which mitigate care gaps, townhomes critically lack equivalent after-school services, thereby exacerbating social disparities and inequalities. The data indicates, not only townhome but also the youngest (ages 6–12) schoolchildren are most vulnerable to the social risks of child care gaps and the social state of child neglect.

4.5 Legislative structuring of care gaps: the social care deficit

Findings demonstrate that the social organisation of work structures a social care deficit. Abductively, empirical findings were triangulated with legislative employment (Department of Labour, 1997, 2006) and education data (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

South African standard employment hours are regulated at 45 h weekly excluding breaks, thus extending to 50 h including mandatory 1 h meal breaks (Department of Labour, 1997). Conversely, South African child education schedules are staggered by age, ranging from 22.5 to 27.5 h weekly including breaks (Table 6). Research indicates child development issues more likely when parents work over 30 h weekly away from home (Barnett *et al.*, 2010; Lopoo, 2005).

Table 6. Legislated schoolchild working hours

School phases	Foundation Grade 1–2 Ages 6–7	Foundation Grade 3 Age 8	Intermediate Grades 4–7 Ages 9–12	Senior phase Grades 8–12 Ages 13–17
Class Time (hours per week)	22.5	25.0	26.5	27.5

Source(s): Adapted from the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statements Grades R–12 (Department of Basic Education, 2011)

The differential social regulation of work, 50 h weekly for adult employment and 22.5–27.5 h for child education, structures a social care deficit. This indicates extreme risk (Mertens *et al.*, 2003), and comparatively more so for younger schoolchildren given that care deficits range from 22.5 to 27.5 standard hours weekly for older and younger schoolchildren. This excludes adult commutes, (seasonal) overtime, non-standard hours, and school holidays, which increase social risk (Section 4.4). The disparate social organisation of work means vulnerable children spend almost equal time in education as neglected in homes during employment hours, more so for younger schoolchildren.

Recent legislative reform, the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act (Republic of South Africa, 2024), fails to address this socio-structural care deficit by not reconciling disparate education and employment social work schedules. Instead, the BELA exacerbates existing burdens by extending adult imprisonment for child truancy (six to 12 months), mandating school management of learner pregnancies, and lowering the age of compulsory education. Such interventions risk aggravating the social issue by socialising children into neglect at even more vulnerable ages. Critically, the BELA Act fundamentally misses the core problem stemming from structurally misaligned social work schedules.

Thus, abductive analyses indicate child care gaps in farmworker homes correlate with a legislated structural misalignment in the social organisation of work for adult employment with respect to child education. This structures a social care deficit, which in the absence of state after-school childcare services, results in a social state of child neglect. Significantly, recent legislative reform in South Africa has attempted to address the consequences of the social state of child neglect but has yet to address the root causes of this socio-structural care deficit. These findings provide a critical empirical basis for re-examining social theoretical, policy and legislative frameworks on work in society.

5. Discussion

This empirical article demonstrates how misaligned legislated social work schedules in education and employment structure a social care deficit and state of neglect, with quantifiable care gaps in homes. These gaps correlate with extreme social risk and, crucially, challenge existing social theories, particularly SRT.

The nuanced data from 13 farmworker homes empirically substantiates these care gaps, which are most acute in townhomes, driven by schedule misalignments (Sections 4.1–4.3) and legislation (Section 4.5). These findings not only directly correlate with a range of identified social risks (Section 4.4) but also critically interrogate SRT, particularly its perceived optimism of ‘self-care’ child work (Hochschild and Machung, 2012) and underestimation of the social, theoretical and policy implications. The study underscores the fundamental need for physical adult child care, as mandated by social policy and legislation (Republic of South Africa, 2005; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011), urging necessary advancements in social scientific theory on work in homes.

SRT posits work in homes as women’s domain, yet its adult-centric bias consistently overlooks the significant work and burdens shifted onto children. This article empirically reveals schoolchildren, especially in townhomes, face weekly care gaps, compelling them to undertake both ‘self-care’ and ‘direct care’ work for younger children, all within pronounced states of social neglect. This empirical reality directly contradicts SRT’s adult-centricity and ‘elastic’ view of women’s infinite capacity to labour, work, and care (Elson, 1998).

Farm-based after-school services, which align with SRT’s emphasis on the role of social services in society (Fraser, 2014), prove effective in mitigating these care gaps. However, the stark absence of equivalent services in towns, coupled with seasonal employment patterns (Section 4.1), severely aggravate care disparities. This effectively shifts the responsibility for socially necessary child care work onto neglected schoolchildren in low-income homes and disproportionately so to young schoolchildren in townhomes. This evidence contests the

‘second shift’ (Hochschild and Machung, 2012) as exclusive to women by illustrating how it is bequeathed to schoolchildren.

The pronounced farm-town home disparity clearly underscores structural social inequalities. While farm-based after-school services mitigate weekly and summer holiday care gaps, their effectiveness is limited by factors such as school dismissals during legislated school schedules, voluntary after-school attendance, and social perceptions of age-appropriate child care. Crucially, the systemic absence of town services disproportionately expose the youngest and most vulnerable schoolchildren to the significant social risks of poor educational outcomes, teenage pregnancy, juvenile crime, child accidents, abuse, and kidnapping. This empirical insight extends SRT’s critique of social service provision in low-income contexts, moving beyond its theoretical-political, adult-centric biases to a social policy and legislative critique.

Critically, lacking this empirical data on the nexus of child work, care and neglect in homes, the BELA Act (Republic of South Africa, 2024), fundamentally misses the core social problem. The BELA does not reform the social organisation of work structuring the social care deficit, neither does it address the absence of state child care after-school service provision which result in a social state of child neglect for townhome, particularly the youngest, schoolchildren. Attempting to mitigate the social risks of child neglect, the BELA does not address the root causes of this socio-structural care deficit stemming from the structurally misaligned and legislatively disparate social organisation of work in society. This state of neglect disproportionately burdens vulnerable schoolchildren with child ‘care’ work, neglect in homes and exposure to significant social risk (Section 4.4).

Without robust empirical data on schoolchildren’s work in homes, SRT’s explanatory power remains limited beyond pre-school children – a recently recognised gap within the theory which Rosen and Newberry (2018) have supplemented by parallel field data from SRF and Children’s Studies drawing on Crivello and Espinoza-Revollo (2018). This article directly addresses this empirical deficit by providing the scientific data SRT currently lacks. By supporting its objective to develop a unified theory of work (Vogel, 2014), and heeding the call for dialectical materialist research methodology rooted in material practices and conditions (Bhattacharya, 2017; Marx, 1932; McNally, 2017), this study offers the crucial empirical grounding.

This empirical insight into the limitations of existing theoretical frameworks finds significant echoes in other low-income, agrarian contexts globally. Similar patterns of care deficits have been documented, for instance, in Indonesia where Newberry (2014) highlights over-subscribed NGO services amidst a stark absence of state pre-school services. In Nicaragua, Dahlblom *et al.* (2009) specifically document children functioning as sibling child care workers within homes. Mirroring the dynamics observed in Witzenberg, such international parallels reinforce the urgent need to extend the scope of SRT, social scientific theory and the sociology of work to fully incorporate children’s work in homes and understand children’s integral social role in society, particularly schoolchildren who are individually burdened by social risks inherent in contexts marked by social child care deficits.

Developing SRT into a robust and unified social scientific theory of work applicable to diverse low-income contexts, and refining the sociology of work, fundamentally demands the integration of child work in homes. This empirical article offers foundational insights for this development, opening critical avenues for future research utilising larger samples to quantify social risk more broadly and for comparative studies to test contextual applicability across different settings. By employing the evidence-based methodology of dialectical materialism, this article directly addresses SRT’s call to strengthen itself into a scientific theory of work (Bhattacharya, 2017; McNally, 2017). In so doing, this study significantly enhances SRT’s scientific relevance, enriches the sociology of work and amplifies sociology’s broader relevance and applicability to pressing social issues, particularly the social well-being of vulnerable individuals such as neglected children in homes.

6. Conclusion

This study's empirical findings, despite their 2016–2017 timeframe, retain relevance due to persistent socio-structural care deficits and social challenges. The article demonstrated how a critical social care deficit, stemming from a discrepant social organisation of work for adult employment (50 h weekly) and child education (22.5–27.5 h weekly) impacts care gaps in South African farmworker homes. Shorter education schedules for younger schoolchildren place the youngest schoolchildren (under age 13) at greater risk. Moreover, the absence of state after-school childcare services in town place townhome schoolchildren at further risk. This highlights significant social disparity and inequality in the social organisation of work and state child care provision for schoolchildren.

This empirical reality fundamentally challenges SRT's adult-centric bias by exposing social inequalities which disproportionately burden vulnerable children in low-income homes. The evidence presented necessitates SRT's reform to account for schoolchildren's work in homes. This directly responds to calls not to abandon SRT for alternative fields of women's, children's nor theoretico-political studies, but to strengthen SRT by rigorous grounding in empirical data on the material practices and conditions of work in society (Bhattacharya, 2017; Marx, 1932; McNally, 2017). This article's empirical grounding advances SRT's relevance to low-income contexts and social science, specifically the sociology of work.

This article provides novel empirical data on schoolchildren's work in farmworker homes, thereby bridging critical empirical, contextual, theoretical, conceptual, policy and legislative gaps. It also proposes a robust research design as model for systematically exploring the nexus of labour, employment, work, care, and neglect in society, social theory, policy and legislation. Future research should prioritise exploring additional local and global parallels and expansion of quantified data across larger samples. Such efforts are essential to inform the development of more effective and evidence-based theories and policies, including the refinement of legislative frameworks like the BELA Act (Republic of South Africa, 2024). Crucially, interventions must address the root causes of social care deficits, rather than attempting to manage social symptoms of social states of child neglect.

Through its empirical critique of SRT, this research article underscores SRT's value for advancing inquiry on work of homes and the strength of the sociology of work as social scientific study of work in society. It strengthens the sociology of work and enhances sociology's capacity to formulate and contribute to actionable policy and legislative social solutions. Findings demonstrate the benefits of the unified social science of sociology and a unified social scientific theory of work (inclusive of homes) for addressing critical social issues and developing actionable targeted social solutions. Ultimately, this article underscores the urgent imperative to systematically align social work schedules in employment and education to close the care gap, resolve the socio-structural care deficit, address the social state of neglect, and mitigate social inequality and social risk for future generations.

About the author

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Ethical note

This research met the ethical valuations and requirements of Stellenbosch University and the code of ethics of the South African Sociological Association and International Sociological Association.

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