
STREET CHILDREN CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

Dr. P. Chand Basha, M.A. Ph.D.,

Reader in Sociology,

K.H. Government Degree College,

DHARMAVARAM.

Anantapur (District)

Andhra Pradesh.

The phenomenon of street children is rapidly becoming one of global epic proportions. Ten years ago, UNICEF estimated that over 30 million children worldwide work and/or live in the streets, for circumstances usually beyond their control, and often without family support. Current estimates of street children worldwide number in the hundreds of millions (Street Children, 1992; Easton et al, 1994; G. Papagiannis, personal communication, 1996). Street children are not limited to the developing world. Perhaps every industrialized country has its runaways and orphans.

The phenomenon of street children is not a recent issue worldwide. It has attracted attention of humanitarian aid agencies and governments for more than thirty years. The term was first used in 1951 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to refer to vagrant children following World War II. The phenomenon of street children was ardently discussed in the wake of the International Year of the Child (1979) and resulting in the formation of the Inter- NGO Program on street children and street youth in 1982 (Lalor 1999).¹⁷ In 1986, the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) executive board approved priority measures on behalf of "children in special difficult circumstances", and special emphasis was placed on street children and on "developing strategies... which would defend their rights, avoid their exploitation, and respond to their personal, family and community needs" (PanterBrick 2001).¹⁸

The term 'street children' is hotly debated. Some say it is negative that it labels and stigmatizes children. Others say it gives them an identity and a sense of belonging. It can include a very wide range of children who: are homeless; work on the streets but sleep at home; either do or do not have family contact; work in open-air markets; live on the streets, railway platforms with their families or alone; live in day or night shelters; spend a lot of time in institutions (Consortium for Street Children).

According to UNICEF: A Situational Analysis (NOIDA: Government of India, 1992), street children are those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, i.e. unoccupied

dwelling, wasteland, etc.) more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines street children thusly: "Any girl or boy for whom the street in the wider sense of the word (including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland etc.) has become home/ habitual abode and/or source of livelihood and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults." (Black 1993; Nieuwenhuizen 2004)

The UNICEF definition makes a distinction between children on the street and children of the street.

"Children on the street are those whose families support base has become increasingly weakened, who must share in the responsibility for family survival by working on the city streets and market places. For these children, the home ceases to be their centre for play, culture and daily life. Nevertheless when the street becomes their daytime activity, most of these children will return home most nights. These children continue to view life from the point of view of their families."

"Children of the street are a much smaller number of children who daily struggle for survival without family support, alone. While often called 'abandoned', they too might also have abandoned their families, tired of insecurity and rejection and aged up with violence. Their ties with home have been broken and de facto they are without families."

According to the UNICEF, 75% of the street children maintain regular contact and another 20% of the street children maintain an intermittent contact with their families and constitute the "children on the street." Only 5% of street children have no family at all; they include orphans, runaways, and refugees, and constitute the "children of the street." The process of transitioning from one category to the next is very gradual (Aptekar 2004).

The National capital is home to over 50,000 street children – constituting 0.4 per cent of Delhi's population and one per cent of the total number of children here – a latest study has claimed. North Delhi has the highest concentration of street children at 10,091 of a total figure of 50,923 estimated to be living in the city.

According to UNICEF, there are 3 types of street children :

- A) Street Living Children :** Children who ran away from their families and live alone on the streets. They move from place to place, living in shelters and abandoned buildings.
- B) Street Working Children :** Children who spend most of their time on the street, fending for themselves, but returning home on a regular basis. It is because of poverty, overcrowding, sexual or physical abuse at home.
- C) Children from Street families :** Children who live on the street with their families. These children live on sidewalks or city-squares with rest of their families. They may be displaced due

to poverty, wars or natural disasters. The families often live a nomadic life, carrying possessions with them.

Street children of Mumbai

India with a population of 1.171 billion, second only to China's 1.338 billion, would be the poorest large or largest poor country in the world. Compared to India, the per capita GNI of China is 3 times, of Mexico 7 times, and of the U.S. 35 times as large. 76% of India's population earned less than \$2 per day as compared to China's 36% and Mexico's 9%. 44% of India's children under age 5 suffer from malnutrition and their mortality rate of 230 per 1000 compares with China's 38 and Mexico's 85. Only 31% of the population in India had access to improved sanitation as compared 55% in China and 85% in Mexico. Putting it in another way, average Indians would think of China as the land of the fortunate, and would consider Mexico heavenly

According to the World Development Report 2012, India had a population of 1,171 million in 2010. 31% of the population i.e. 363 million were below age 14. It was estimated that about 16 to 20% of these children work and live in urban areas, many without a home (Census of India 2010; McFadyen 2004, 16).

The Problems of Street Children

Street children have a greater burden than other poor children who are supervised by adults. Their problems could be grouped into three classes: social, physical, and psychological.

A. Social Problems

1. Poverty and illiteracy: They lack basic resources to sustain a healthy living. They usually have no financial means to buy food, which is crucial for their development. Street children cannot afford to go to school unless supported by non-formal services provided by NGOs, etc. Even where schools are free, many children cannot afford to buy uniforms, shoes and books. Since they live in places where they are not adequately protected from the environment, they rarely have access to facilities that they need for hygiene and sanitation, such as toilets and clean and safe water supply. They are, therefore, more vulnerable to health problems resulting from poor sanitation.

2. Discrimination and Lack of Accessible Resources: When civic authorities plan towns, cities, etc. street children's plight tends to be excluded from the planning process resulting in their not having facilities to get medical, educational, recreational and vocational resources. They face problems such as lack of vaccinations; poor health, illiteracy, and they cannot acquire skills needed for finding jobs.

3. Violent Environment: The Street is an unprotected environment and street children are exploited frequently. In some places, street children may even face the possibility of physical injuries or death from violence. Common sources of violence are: the police, gangs, drug

peddlers, pimps, other street children, families and sexual partners.

4. Stigmatization: Society usually perceives street children as difficult children who are out there to cause trouble. In general, the public thinks that street children are uncontrollable and violent, have substance use problems, have no morals, have lost all the ability to feel emotions such as love and that they turn into terrorists and revolutionaries. They tend to be unsympathetic to the street children's plight. This negative attitude may be a result of the society's inability to care for its people.

B. Physical Problems

1. Lack of Adequate Nutrition: As street children do not get enough to eat, they are malnourished, anaemic and suffer from vitamin deficiencies.

2. Injuries: Injuries may be caused intentionally (including injuring self while intoxicated or when depressed) and unintentionally, e.g. due to use of tools which have been designed for adults. The rate of injuries is usually higher for male than for female street children.

3. Sexual and Reproductive Health Problems: Sexual and reproductive health problems affect both girls and boys. However, street girls are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. Common sexual and reproductive health problems include sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies.

4. Common diseases: Street children experience many common diseases such as tuberculosis; skin diseases, dental problems and parasitic diseases which can be prevented easily if these children have enough resources and their basic needs are met.

C. Psychological Problems

1. A Stressful Past: Many situations and events that pushed these children onto the street in the first place (like natural disasters, manmade disasters, exploitation and conflicts) may have a lasting impact on their well-being. For example, the family conflict that pushed the child onto the streets continues to deprive the child of emotional and material support for years afterwards.

2. A Transitory Lifestyle: Street children in some large cities move frequently from district to district or between cities. Sometimes they do this by choice, but at other times they are forced to move to hide from the police, welfare authorities, gangs, and drug peddlers. This type of lifestyle leads to problems of social isolation and loneliness and difficulties in developing emotional attachments to special individuals.

3. Mental Health: The stress that street children experience makes them vulnerable to emotional problems, psychiatric disorders and learning difficulties. They do not receive adequate care for these conditions.

4. Substance Use: Many street children are involved in harmful use of psychoactive substances. This can lead to overdose, increase the chance of accidents, violence, unwanted pregnancy and unprotected sex. Over time, the continued use of substances can lead to complications such as brain and liver damage.

Occupational Characteristics of Street Children

Typically street children engage in various odd jobs, some of the common ones are described below:

1. Rag-picking: In many cities, it is a common sight to see children carrying gunny bags on their shoulders, scavenging dustbins, garbage heaps, city dumps to collect waste materials such as papers, tins, plastic material, bottles, etc., which have a recycling value.

2. Porters: Many street children work in railway stations, bus stands, godowns, wholesale markets carrying heavy loads to earn their living.

3. Hotel Labour: Street children also work in subhuman working conditions in small hotels, roadside eateries, dhabas, restaurants, etc. earning meager wages.

4. Begging: Begging is also a form of earning for street children. Children affected by disease or physical handicap are often forced into begging by antisocial gangs for making money.

5. Prostitution: Many street children, especially those who are entirely on their own on the street are engaged in or exploited sexually. Both boys as well as girls are engaged in sexual activities, either for material gains, survival needs, psychological needs or peer group pressure.

6. Odd Jobs: Street children are involved in various other odd jobs such as jobs in parking areas, work as petty-hawkers, peddlers, messenger boys, shoe shines, cleaners, helpers in shops and establishments, gas stations, garages, as labourers in construction sites, small factories and institutions. All these occupations have a destructive effect on their behaviour pattern and social living

Causes of Street Children as a Problem

It is not difficult to isolate the factors responsible for the prevalence and practice of the

phenomenon of street children. Family poverty, family disorganization, maltreatment and abuse of children at home, labour demand suitable to the children in the urban informal and unorganized sectors and the lack of interest in education in these children are the common and specific factors that compel the children to be on the streets. Needless to add, the phenomenon is a product of the larger problem of child maltreatment which includes inter alia, child abuse, neglect and a variety of unhealthy patterns of parent-child relations at home. However, the general assumption is that poverty causes their families to disintegrate and these results in street children phenomenon. This cannot be argued with certainty. There are instances to show that those families lacking adequate food, clothing and shelter, still interact with their children with love, affection and cooperation. Therefore, it is necessary to take the family situation and family dynamics into consideration for understanding the determinants of the problem of street children. The main reason, which prompts these children to run away from home, is their family background, social structure and economic problems.

1. Broken families and irresponsible parents
2. Torture by family members and step parents
3. Excessive control by parents
4. Large family size
5. Poverty
6. Less wages or low income
7. Father's drunkenness
8. Disinterest in studies
9. Parents' illicit relationship, actions and practices
10. Anxiety to earn and spend lavishly, according to their whims and fancies.
11. Desire to live in towns and cities
12. Desire to do things independently without restriction

Strategies to Contain the Problem

There are many social problems which need to be addressed with an approach, a theory and a model. Problem of street children is no exception. The three models which are popular in dealing with the problem of street children are.

1. Containment (Reformation): This usually takes place in closed institutions where children are subjected to repressive correctional measures.

2. Cure Approach: This emphasizes on weaning children away from street life, generally providing them education and regular work.

3. Prevention: This implies stopping the children appearing on the streets by eliminating urban poverty, providing free and fair educational facilities to the poor and needy, etc., but the

existing and available studies reveal that institutional strategy has largely failed, where as cure strategy has yielded some positive results. The preventive strategy is the best among them but least tried upon.

Short Term Measures

(a) Essential to know the precise numbers of street children in each city and to know their lifestyles and (b) Basic amenities. Short term measures suggested are as follows:

1. Safe drinking water, toilet and bath room
2. NGO's like Sulabh International to be contacted to do these works and also work together with Govt. agencies
3. Methodologies need to be developed to determine various aspects of problem
4. Child participation- using discussion and interviewing, questionnaires have been found to be innovative, fun, suitable for children and easy to manage.
5. NGO's and Government agencies working among street children need to have more interaction. They should involve street children and law enforcement authorities to work out realistic solutions.

2 Long Term Solutions

Socio-economic reasons such as poverty, urbanization and outdated primary education that force children on street, must be addressed.

- A. Child labor must be abolished
- B. Families must be offered soft loans for setting up small enterprises, and given opportunities for vocational training
- C. Schooling must be made compulsory and accessible.
- D. Promote rural development.

CONCLUSION

India has set in place various forms of public policy concerning street children over the past two decades, but they have largely been ineffective because they are uninformed by sociological, anthropological, and geographical research on street children, meaning they do not always correctly assess and address needs. A multiple level intervention strategy needs to begin with the rehabilitation of street families. They must be provided with social security to stop children from working for incomes; night shelters must be provided for boys and girls, and their health and education requirements must be addressed. Since most of the street children are illiterate, or near-illiterate, efforts to provide them with basic education need to spread their net much wider than they do at present.

Unfortunately, one of the main problem identified in India is child labour which, due to the precarious socio-economic situation of the workers and their families, is difficult to

address. The government is however implementing numerous activities and programmes to deal with child labour. Similar interventions and programmes are being implemented with street children and trafficking of children. Measures include legislation, awareness raising, a national policy and education incentives. Furthermore, resources are not always a problem and it must be understood that spending on children is important. Social services should be prioritized in the allocation of the national budget. Although institutional framework exists most of the time, implementation has lagged behind. While equitable social and economic development is imperative for dealing with the root causes of violence, challenging the notions of masculinity could be the basis of a preventive strategy. Affirmative action for children, girls and boys of different age groups in different settings could add value to social policy. Effective and child-friendly legislation, complaints procedures and systems for redressal and justice and support services in the event of violence are critical. The most important is a need to change the people's mindsets with regard to violence against children.

REFERENCES

1. P. Nieuwenhuizen, Street Children in Bangalore (India). Their dreams and their future, Apeldoorn – Antwerpen, Het Spinhuis Publishers, 2006, 45. (Hereafter cited as, P. Nieuwenhuizen, Street Children in Bangalore).
2. Cf. P. Sondhi-Garg, Street Children. Lives of Valor and Vulnerability, New Delhi, Reference Press, 2004,
3. Black, M., (1993) Street and Working Children: Global Seminar Report. Florence: UNICEF
4. B. D'Souza, Children in Adult Garb. The Street Children's Reality. A Research Study in Mumbai, Mumbai, Don Bosco Communications, 2008, 51. (Hereafter cited as, B. D'Souza, Children in Adult Garb).
5. R. Pandey, Street Children of India. A Situational Analysis, Allahabad, Chugh Publications, 1991, 17. (Hereafter cited as, R. PANDEY, Street Children of India).
6. UNICEF (2012), The State of The World's Children 2011, p.4