TWICE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE: THE PLIGHT OF STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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Abstract

Globally, tens to hundreds of millions of children and youth find themselves living and/or working on the streets and neglected on the margins of society. Referred to as street-connected children and youth to denote the central role the streets play in their everyday lives, they are present in both the developed and developing world, and regardless of geographic location, have significant morbidities and mortality. Existing policies and practices targeting street-connected young people typically characterise them as juvenile delinquents and criminalise their presence on the streets, without taking into account the reasons for their street-involvement.

This paper provides a summary and discussion of a systematic review that examined the reasons children and youth around the world are reported for their street-involvement. The systematic review included a pool of over 13,000 participants, representing 49 studies from 24 countries around the world. Globally, children and youth reported poverty, family conflict and abuse as their most common reasons for street-involvement and infrequently identified delinquent behaviours for their circumstances. The findings demonstrate that children and youth in street circumstances have often turned to the streets to escape violent and intolerable situations at home. However, once children and youth are on the street, they are further subject to maltreatment, including extreme physical and sexual violence perpetrated by peers, strangers, and authorities. Instead of oppressive policies that criminalise street-connected children and youth, they require specialised support and child protection that takes into consideration their especially vulnerable situation.

Keywords: street-connected children and youth, family conflict, physical and sexual abuse, structural violence, policy, child protection
Young people aged 10-24 make up 25 percent of the world’s population (UNFPA, 2014). A significant proportion of these young people globally are being left behind, as tens to hundreds of millions find themselves living and/or working on the streets and neglected on the margins of society; their potential to thrive and make substantial contributions to the world being limited (UNICEF, 2012; UNOHCHR, 2012). Referred to as street-connected children and youth to denote the central role the streets play in their everyday lives (UNOHCHR, 2012), they are present in both the developed and developing world, and regardless of geographic location have significant morbidities and mortality (Auerswald, Lin, and Parriott, 2016; Medlow, Klineberg, and Steinbeck, 2014; Roy et al., 2004; Woan, Lin, and Auerswald, 2013). Street-connected children and youth are highly stigmatised, subject to numerous human rights violations, characterised as juvenile delinquents by society, and their presence on the street is frequently criminalised (Auerswald and Goldblatt, 2016; Embleton, Lee, Gunn, Ayuku, and Braithstein, 2016; UNOHCHR, 2012). In resource-constrained settings, strategies frequently involve violent street sweeps conducted by police with children being placed in overcrowded detention centres or repatriating them to unsafe care environments (Human Rights, 2006a, 2006b, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 1997). In very high-income regions, youth are ticketed for sleeping in public places (Auerswald and Goldblatt, 2016), and may find themselves in jail for begging and panhandling (Canadian Observancy on Homelessness, 2015; NLCHP, 2014). These policies and practices cause increased harm to street-connected youth, target behaviours required for survival on the street, and characterise them as criminals, while failing to take into account the reasons for their street-involvement.

In light of these policies and a lack of consideration for the underlying causes of child and youth homelessness, we conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to examine the reasons children and youth around the world report for their street-involvement. We analysed the available data by level of human development, geographic region, and gender (Embleton et al., 2016). The systematic review included a pool of over 13,000 participants, representing 49 studies from 24 countries around the world. The review uncovered common causes for street-involvement reported by children and youth globally, but also identified distinctions between those living in the developed versus developing world.

Globally, children and youth reported poverty, family conflict and abuse as their most common reasons for street-involvement and infrequently identified delinquent behaviours for their circumstances (Embleton et al., 2016). It is likely that poverty, family conflict and abuse interact synergistically to create a confluence of deleterious circumstances, and that poverty exacerbates family dysfunction and abuse, resulting in structural and physical violence sustained by this extremely vulnerable population.

Overwhelmingly, in the developing world, 42 percent of children and youth connected to the street self-reported poverty as their primary reason for street-involvement (Embleton et al., 2016). Despite emerging economies, significant reductions in extreme poverty, and advances in infrastructure in the developing world, children and youth continue to turn to the street as a result of
impoverished circumstances at home. Street-connected children and youth in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to structural violence, and various economic, legal, political, religious, and cultural social structures limit people’s ability to reach their potential, meet their basic needs, and thus harm them (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, and Keshavjee, 2006). Structural violence, and the resulting massive inequalities, insecurity, and social injustices forces children and youth to join the streets in order to escape abysmal conditions that many families living in the bottom billion face. Structural violence for many of these children produces situations and circumstances that leave them vulnerable to other forms of violence, particularly emotional, physical, and sexual.

Abuse and family conflict are the second and third most commonly self-reported reasons for children and youth’s street-involvement in the developing world and are the leading self-reported reasons in developed countries. In very high-income settings, homeless youth most frequently reported family conflict as their reason for street-involvement (48 percent), followed by abuse (28 percent), and psychosocial reasons (26 percent). In this context, girls and young women were significantly more likely to report abuse-related reasons for street-involvement than males (28 percent versus 18 percent), whereas the opposite was observed in developing countries, where males more frequently reported abuse (22 percent versus 13 percent). Family conflict and abuse as reported in this review are likely overlapping and intersecting reasons that are not independent events, and therefore, child maltreatment represents a significant proportion of the reasons children and youth turn to the streets for survival globally (Embleton et al., 2016).

Child maltreatment is prevalent worldwide, and most frequently perpetrated by parents or caregivers in the form of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, exploitation, and neglect, or through witnessing intimate partner violence (Akmatov, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2009). It represents a significant burden to children’s health and well-being, and poses a serious threat to the long-term mental and physical health of children. Parental maltreatment of children is associated with alcohol and drug misuse, low educational attainment, mental illness, exposure to maltreatment as a child, and living in poverty (Gilbert et al., 2009). This supports the concept that poverty, the most frequently self-reported reason for street-involvement globally, interacts or exacerbates family dysfunction and abuse, and that together, these three factors drive street-involvement.

In developed countries, child protection and welfare systems are well established and in place to respond to cases of maltreatment and abuse (Gilbert et al., 2012). Yet, a substantial proportion of street-connected children and youth in very high-income settings report family conflict and abuse as their reason for street-involvement. Therefore, these systems may be failing and not adequately protecting the most vulnerable children and youth (Gilbert et al., 2012). Children and youth removed from unstable care environments and placed in foster care are at high-risk of homelessness (Zlotnick, Tam, and Zerger, 2012), which is indicative of substantial shortcomings in the child welfare system. In contrast, low- and middle-income settings typically lack well-established child protection systems (Ray, Davey, and Nolan, 2011), resulting in weak policies and poorly coordinated responses to address reported cases of child abuse and neglect (Child, Naker, Horton,
Walakira, and Devries, 2014). Consequently, in many resource-constrained settings, children and youth turn to the streets in situations of family conflict and abuse, as the child protection system is inadequately developed to respond to them. There is a clear need to develop and strengthen social protection policies and child welfare systems in both developing and developed countries to address how poverty, abuse, and family conflict are impacting children’s street-involvement (Embleton et al., 2016).

It is evident from these findings that children and youth in street circumstances have often turned to the streets to escape violent and intolerable situations at home. However, once children and youth are on the street, they are further subject to maltreatment, including extreme physical and sexual violence perpetrated by peers, strangers, and authorities (Bender, Brown, Thompson, Ferguson, and Langenderfer, 2015; Embleton et al., 2015; Human Rights Watch, 1997; Lockhart, 2008; Wachira et al., 2015), while living in tremendously oppressive circumstances. Their life circumstances and experience of violence before the onset of homelessness, and once street-involved, likely contribute to their numerous morbidities and impact assisting them to get off the streets. There is a profound association between experiencing childhood abuse and detrimental health and human capital outcomes, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, alcohol and drug use, HIV and risky sexual behaviours, a reduction in educational and employment attainment, and criminal behaviours (Gilbert et al., 2009); all of which have been reported among street-connected children and youth (Auerswald et al., 2016; Bender et al., 2015; Embleton, Mwangi, Vreeman, Ayuku, ans Braitstein, 2013; Medlow et al., 2014; Roy et al., 2004; Roy, Haley, Leclerc, Cedras, and Weber, 2003; Woan et al., 2013).

Street-connected children and youth are twice victims of violence, before the onset of homelessness and once street-involved. Their reasons for coming to the streets indicate these children and youth find themselves in extremely difficult circumstances, and are subject to numerous human rights violations. There is a clear link between experiencing maltreatment and violence at home and subsequent street-involvement for children and youth globally (Embleton et al., 2016). Instead of oppressive policies that criminalise street-connected children and youth, they require specialised support and child protection that takes into consideration their especially vulnerable situation.
References


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