



State of the World's Street Children: Violence

2. REPORT FINDINGS

The report utilises the Ecological Model to distinguish between the many influences on violence and to provide a framework for understanding how these influences interact. The model is categorised into four influences:

- Individual
- Relationship
- Community
- Societal

The report concludes that street children have a high risk of exposure to multiple abuses in a range of environments. Ill-treatment by extended families, local neighbourhoods or welfare services push vulnerable children to the streets; especially for those who have experienced trauma, perhaps as refugees or trafficked children, or who have suffered famine, natural disasters, social violence or war.

Despite the differences in types and intensity of violence across the world, street children in developed and developing countries have strikingly similar experiences. Most children have experienced intra-family violence and come from fragile families located in income poor neighbourhoods.

Many governments have not developed preventative and protective policies for street children and continue to use violent tactics as an interim solution. These tactics contravene their rights, exacerbate street children's experiences of violence and scapegoat them and their families. Understanding street children's exposure and responses to violence is key to developing integrated preventive and protective policies and services which nurture children's resilience.

Young Lives and Violence

- Combined and compounded effects of abuse and deprivation undermine the chances of street children to develop into healthy young people and adults.
- The term 'street children' is increasingly recognized to be a socially constructed category that in reality does not form a clearly defined, homogeneous population or phenomenon. Upon peeling away the 'street children' label, individual girls and boys of all ages are found living and working in public spaces, visible in the great majority of the world's urban centres
- Street boys tend to replicate violence as aggressors and report more physical violence, while girls tend to internalize violence and may be more vulnerable to ongoing abuse and victimization. Girls also tend to be vulnerable to additional forms of violence in crisis situations when compared to men and boys
- Street children are excluded by society, however such portrayals are in danger of ignoring children's abilities to plan, control their actions and navigate within their environments - in other words their agency. Evidence demonstrates that street-working and street-homeless children regularly plan and put into practice survival strategies, navigating risks and taking opportunities presented within on-street and off-street environments.



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Violence in the Home

- Family relationships form a vital development pathway for children. Violence in the family affects each child's development differently, but service providers and researchers point to family violence as a key factor pushing children onto the streets.
- Biological parents were the majority of perpetrators for physical abuse whereas non-family members most often perpetrated sexual abuse.
- Sexual abuse, violence and emotional neglect exist at all levels of society, but children who live in material deprivation and in fragmented communities may feel they have nowhere to turn but to the street.
- Infants or children who are rejected, who experience a highly unpredictable or even abusive response from their caregiver develop attachment styles that are shaped by these early experiences. Street children's experiences of maltreatment and rejection effects their subsequent emotional, social, cognitive and even physical development.
- Child maltreatment is likely to be more prevalent where it is socially sanctioned and indeed, encouraged because parents have learned (from relationships, community and/or wider society) harsh child-management practices which are believed to be effective or will prepare children for the hardships of adult life.
- Violence, neglect and abuse by primary carers undermines children's development and can reduce their ability to care for themselves in later life.

Violence in the Community

- Children who work or live in the streets come from poor households in poor, and increasingly urban, neighbourhoods. Poor neighbourhoods tend to have weak infrastructure with fewer linkages between community-based organizations.
- Street children are commonly excluded from schools as a result of fights, aggressive reactions to teachers, or threats of violence to other children, or withdrawn by families unable to pay school fees, buy uniforms or school materials. The use of corporal punishment in school humiliates children while reinforcing cultural acceptance of violence as a form of control.
- Social relationships, particularly with neighbours, community associations, religious networks, close friends and relatives, positively affect family functioning, parent-child interaction and child development. Conversely, social isolation is associated with an increased risk of child abuse and neglect, and higher levels of physical abuse and neglect of children are associated with neighbourhoods which have lower levels of social interactions
- There have been many reports across the world of police violence against street children in public places. Periodic round-ups of children, extortion, threats, physical abuse, victimization, rape and murder by police officers have been documented time and again by street children, service providers, the media, lawyers and researchers.
- Street children are often involved in mutually supportive relationships, with solidarity and self-support amongst children's groups more prominent than violence, an important point made by experienced researchers concerned that over-playing violence between street children can in itself stigmatize and isolate street children and distort policies.
- Public hostility and stigmatization on the basis of their appearance and activities are a common form of violence experienced by street children.



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Violence in Society

- Wider society plays a vital role in the lives of street children. Customs and values of mainstream society shape attitudes towards violence, human rights and children.
- Street children are often removed from the street or encouraged to leave public spaces ostensibly for 'reform', 'rehabilitation' or 'protection'. But their reports of abuse and neglect in detention centres and welfare shelters are received from countries across the world. Poor physical conditions and inadequate staffing reflect the low priority awarded by policy-makers to improving street children's future life chances.
- NGO shelters and other residential services for street children can perpetuate abuse, if only by concentrating children accustomed to violence in overcrowded, poorly conditioned, under-managed and under-staffed conditions. Research has also questioned whether NGOs unwittingly reproduce stereotypes and inferior opportunities for street children.
- Street children come from some of the poorest and most socially isolated families, often from minority ethnic groups. These families are often socially excluded by governmental and/or corporate actions which directly or indirectly exclude some people from participation in mainstream society.
- Family violence, considered in many cultures as a private matter, can be recognized as a clear matter for public intervention. Societies which view children as the property of their parents are ill-equipped to protect children from abuse, while those that emphasize children's rights are likely to experience much lower levels of child abuse.
- Another important factor influencing rates of child maltreatment is the degree of inequality that exists within a society; the degree of economic inequality rather than overall level of prosperity being the crucial factor.