

A Study to Assess Various Problems Faced by Street Children of Bhopal City

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Abstract

Introduction: Like all other children, although street children have the basic right to develop, survive and thrive, they encounter innumerable problems. To do so, at first it is necessary to address these children in terms of what problems they face in their everyday life, what is their survival mechanism and in a broad sense their livelihood process. This research is an attempt to shed light on these cruxes in the context of Bhopal city in Madhya Pradesh. The study was conducted with objectives to observe the lifestyle of street children, to identify the problems faced by them, and to assess their survival and coping mechanism in response to the problems they encounter.

Methods and Materials: The study was a cross-sectional study to access various problems faced by street adolescents of Bhopal city. Street children were identified using snowballing techniques and data from these street children was obtained via interview using a checklist having various parameters about street children according to study needs. 100 willing street children were identified and enrolled for the study.

Results: According to certain indicators like dwelling condition, income level, food habit, education and health, among the street children who were interviewed, 37% were found to be educated below fifth standard and 73% were uneducated. The respondents were of ages 11 to 15 years. Most of them were Hindus. 51% of the children on street used community toilets, 53% practiced open defecation. Most of them did not get sufficient food to eat. Major work reported was serving in hotels, dhabas and begging. Main problem faced during work was heavy workload and less payment received, poor health and vulnerability and verbal abuse. Major coping mechanism was keeping patience and enduring the problems until finding some solution.

Conclusion: The present menace of mushrooming of different categories of disadvantaged, abandoned, vulnerable, destitute street living, working and playing children in the cities has posed an intense threat to humanity and child rights. The livelihood trajectories of the street children entangled with terrific and aggregated predicaments and problems is nothing but the presentation of their endangered and chaotic livelihood that requires very selective and careful choice and application of coping mechanisms to survive on the streets.

Keywords: Street children, Coping mechanism, Problem faced

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Introduction

Majority of us are blessed because when we return home from offices, colleges and schools there is a family waiting for us, which takes away our tiredness. But all are not that fortunate. Many children in India are deprived of this feeling of family and home. We celebrate every occasion but wonder how street children spend their life and celebrate festivals. They spend their entire life near bus stations, railway stations, markets, on footpaths, streets, etc. Though a well-structured data and number is not available but it is estimated that India has more than 400,000 street children. 18 million children work on streets and 5%–20% have no connection with their families. Also India has the largest population of street children in the world. Definition of a Street Child by UNICEF, "...any girl or boy...for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults".

UNICEF calls street children the most vulnerable group of children in India, which falls under two categories: (1) Children on the street: They earn a livelihood from street such as street urchins and beggars; they return home at night and have contact with their families. (2) Children of the street: They are homeless children who live and sleep on the streets in urban areas. The distinction is an important one because children of the street lack emotional and psychological support of a family. Street children are often called the *hidden children*. Being hidden, they are at a higher risk to being abused, exploited and neglected. Children living and working in the streets are a manifestation of the problems, which children and families experience in communities as a result of health, social and economic factors which render homeless effective in providing for the children's well-being, thus leading to their marginalization. While some vulnerable children may be protected through social assistance and child care services provided by the government and non-governmental organizations, there are other children who fail to be detected and some of them become children living and working in the street. There are a number of factors that lead children to living on the street. This study is therefore a small attempt to find out these factors, hindrances, difficulties and hardships faced by the children residing on streets.

Objectives

- To observe the lifestyle of the street children at various sites, 2). To identify the problems faced by street children, and
- To assess their survival and coping mechanism in response to the problems they encounter

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted on the street children of a city of central India. The study was conducted over a period of three months in suburban and urban areas of Bhopal city. One hundred children were enrolled for the study by snowball technique of sampling. On reaching the place, namely, bus stops, railway stations and near the traffic signals the child was identified and made comfortable. The purpose of the study was explained and the interview was taken using a semi-structured questionnaire. Information regarding his/her demographic profile, work, place, problem and coping mechanism was gathered. On the basis of their habitats, street children were divided into two categories – children *on* the street and children *of* the street. Obtained data was entered into MS Excel and analyzed using Epi-info 7. Purpose of the study was explained to the participants and verbal consent was taken before interview. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from ethical committee of Gandhi Medical College, Bhopal.

Results

A total of 100 children were enrolled for the study, out of whom 49 children *on* the street category and 51 were children *of* the street category. Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants are shown in Table 1 according to the two categories of street children. According to the sociodemographic characteristics of street children of both categories, 59% participants of children *on* the street belonged to age group of 11–15 years of age and in children *of* the street 47% were in the age group of 6–10 years. In both groups, maximum participant were male 81% and 80%, 77% and 81% were Hindu by religion respectively. If we see the migration status of children of the street (67%) were from outside of Bhopal. No specific and secured place of residence and/or lack of shelter for children of the street, had forced a lot of them to sleep in the open places like the pavements of roads (20%), under bridges (33%), public places (20%), etc. Comparing the education status of both categories, more illiterate were children of street (73%) as compared to 53% in children on the street. Addiction pattern was more or less similar in both categories. On assessing the life style of both the groups, children of the street were beggars (37%) and rag pickers (27%) whereas 39% children on the street were serving in hotels. Both groups were working for money (60% and 53%), used open public places for defecating-squatting, difficulties in bathing, and washing clothes and drying was more in children of the street (Table 3). Absence of parents/family members, no near and dear ones, no affection and loved ones were great emotional threats among the respondents. The various problems faced by both the groups were use of bad language (83%, 92%) followed by lack of recreation (67%, 80%), followed by

more workload and less payment (79%, 84%) and poor health and vulnerability (87%, 94). Weak health due to hard work, diseases and malnutrition were common health problems of the respondents and most of them did self-administration for any medical ailments. Although how the street children survive to the respective lifestyle issues combating whether by avoiding or approaching different

problems as already outlined in the earlier point, for an in-depth understanding of some of their specific and special coping mechanism to survive are necessary to mention. In response to lack of access to basic amenities, a common strategy generally adopted by the street children was to keep patience and endure the problem until they found some solution.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Street Children

S. No.	Variables	Children on the Street (n=49)	Children of the Street (n=51)
1	Age	11–15 years (59%)	6–10 years (47%)
2	Sex	Male (89%), Female (11%)	Male (80%), Female (20%)
3	Religion	Hindu (77%), Muslim (33%)	Hindu (81%), Muslim (19%)
4	Migration status	Bhopal (92%) Outside Bhopal (8%)	Bhopal (33%) Outside Bhopal (67%)
5	Parental status	Both parents present (32%) Either one parent (41%) None (27%)	Both parents present (24%) Either one parent (29%) None (47%)
6	Education status	Up to V (37%) Up to X (10%) Uneducated (53%)	Up to V (27%) Up to X (00%) Uneducated (73%)
7	Addiction	Smoking (52%) Chewing (39%) Volatile solution (5%) No addiction (4%)	Smoking (60%), Chewing (33%) Volatile solution (7%)

Table 2. Life Style of Street Children

S. No.	Variables	Children on the Street (n=49)	Children of the Street (n=51)
1	Night stay at	98% sleep at home 2% work place	20% footpath 33% over bridge 20% public place
2	Type of work	Street vending (30%) Serving in hotel (39%) Rag picking (26%) Car washing (5%)	Begging (37%) Rag picking (27%) Street vending (26%) Serving in hotel (10%)
3	Reason for being on street	For money (60%), Family condition (17%) Search of work (23%)	For money (53%), Search of work (21%) Family condition (26%)
4	Defecation	Open (49%), Community toilets (51%)	Open (53%) Community toilets (47%)
5	Water for bathing	Nagar nigam supply (67%) Leaked water pipes (23%) Other (10%)	Nagar nigam supply (5%) Leaked water pipes (39%) Others (46%)
6	Enough clothes	No (93%)	No (100%)
7	Medical facilities	Govt. (67%) Self-medication (13%) Treatment by quacks (20%)	Govt. facilities (15%) Self-medication (71%) Treatment by quacks (14%)

Table 3. Distribution of Problems Faced by Street Children at Working Place

S. No.	Problems	Children on the Street (n=49)	Children of the Street (n=51)
1	Lack of security and Protection	17 (34%)	31 (60%)
2	Lack of capabilities	13 (26%)	27 (53%)
3	More work and less money	39 (79%)	43 (84%)
4	Torture from owner	23 (46%)	31 (60%)
5	Lack of social ties and networks	27 (55%)	36 (70%)
6	Pick pocketing/theft	09 (18%)	25 (49%)
7	Sexually abused	00 (00%)	02 (3.9%)
8	Bad language	41 (83%)	47 (92%)
9	Abused by police	06 (12%)	18 (35%)
10	Lack of recreation	33 (67%)	41 (80%)
11	Poor health and vulnerability	43 (87%)	48 (94%)

Table 4. Coping Mechanism of Street Children

S. No.	Coping Mechanism	Children on the Street (n=49)	Children of the Street (n=51)
1	Keep patience and endure the problem until found some solution	47 (96%)	43 (84%)
2	Look for confirming and non-confirming job	29 (59%)	35 (68%)
4	Self-mutilation and self-humiliation	09 (18)	06 (12%)
5	Change location	11 (22%)	21 (41%)

Conclusion

Street children vary across cities and regions. But a majority of these children are boys. It is also important to note that girl street children are also found in visible spaces. Age-wise 59% of the street children are between 11 and 15 years while 49% are between 6 and 10 years age group. The children of the street are more vulnerable as compared to on the street children Being atypical with the mainstream children of the society, the life style of the street children in terms of their food habits, night shelter/sleeping place at night, sources of water (drinking, bathing and others), frequency of taking shower, use of toilet, clothing, means of survival (occupation), income, expenditure and savings, healthcare, diseases and treatment, educational status and skill, ownership, substance abuse and street children, recreational activities, social bondage: sharing of happenings, group networks and gang culture and aspirations, as revealed above, is symptomatic to continuous challenges, threats and struggles. The absence of normal living becoming chaotic and problematic offers street children an endangered lifestyle, which is entangled and concentrated with innumerable predicaments and stress. Homelessness and street life have extremely detrimental effects on children.

Limitation of the Study

Only a small sample of population could be selected because of the resources and manpower constraints Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, it is difficult to establish causal relationship between the dependent and

predicting variables Due to purposive sampling methods, study findings cannot be generalized.

Recommendations

There is need for coordination of responses to street children's rights. There is need for research to be conducted to fill the information gap on the effects of street environments on child development. Capacity building and empowerment of parents and families need to be dealt with to handle challenging behavior. There is a need to develop and strengthen the programs and structures to address and minimize identified family conditions such as family disintegration, substance abuse, child abuse, neglect, exploitation, HIV/AIDS, child headed households and poverty, and thus minimize circumstances which give rise to children leaving their homes. Improve the economic capacity of households through short-term interventions such as conditional cash transfers, direct subsidies, and material assistance, as well as longer-term interventions such as improving agricultural efficiency, and facilitating access to financial services offered by micro-finance institutions. Lastly, rehabilitation of street children is must to overcome this problem and such initiatives are very good because these work at ground level. India should come up with more such initiatives and campaigns so as to give a home and happiness to every child of India. Moreover, parents must work towards a better life and upbringing of their children instead of just giving birth.

Conflict of Interest: None

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