

Rethinking the Street Children Phenomena: An Evaluation of Losses Gains and Anticipation, the Case of Nakuru Municipality, Kenya

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Abstract

Throughout the world there are children whose habitation is on the streets and since they domicile in the streets they are generally referred to as street children. In Nakuru town a quick glance is sufficient for one to observe the presence of these street children. These Children are denied their basic rights and are exposed to physical and sexual abuse and they also live in inhumane and deleterious conditions. It is against this background that the study was carried out with the main objective being to find out why the street children phenomenon persists and continues to increase despite all the efforts taken to end it. One hundred street children and six social workers were interviewed and the data obtained was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientist. The study gives various recommendations which include eliminating factors that lead to streetism and utilizing the power of the mass media.

Key Words: Street Children, Phenomenon, Nakuru Town, Streetism

Introduction

The prevalence of street children in urban centres has been a growing concern. Most cities in the World today have been entangled in the web of the street children, a phenomenon many city residents would like to be done away with and forgotten. But according to Mullahey (2003), a free society needs constantly to consider and discuss the present reality in the light of its past traditions and where it wants to go. Every city is striving to be free from the menace of street children, but we must understand where we are coming from and what we are currently doing so as to be viably armed with possible solutions of overcoming the street children phenomenon. This paper is based on the light of the above noting that the subject has been debated, it is still being debated and we feel we should also be involved in working and contributing towards providing future solutions.

Street children in Kenya face various hardships in their daily lives that range from hazards of living on the streets, harassment, public ridicules and even abuse by one another and even the police. These children have been questioned about who they are; where they come from; why they prefer the street over schools and home what their attitudes to schools and career are.

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According to Le Roux (1996), contrary to popular belief, street children have a function in society. Their continuing presence function to reaffirm the existing prejudices about families, substance abuse, street crime and birth control. The street children are part of modern life as it is organized today: a street culture of petty crime, drug selling and prostitution. They are part of the job market as unskilled, energetic, available, low cost and short term employees.

The term street children was coined to identify Street children as millions of destitute children who are on their own in large cities. United Nations Institute for Children Education Fund (UNICEF) distinguishes between two different groups of children based on their family situations but have a common characteristic in that they spend their lives in the street (Parks, 1993). The first category is of children “on” the street. These are children who work and maintain fairly regular relationships with their families. The second category according to Parks (1993) is of children “of” the street and they consider the street their home. The streets are where they eat, sleep, play and make friends.

Children in both of the categories have much in common; they have unstable emotional relationships with the adult world, a negative self image, social stigma, violence, exploitation and uncertain futures. According to the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UN-ODCCP, 2000) there are two main trends in defining the term. There is one adopted by the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), researchers and the media and another definition with a legal inclination.

The NGOs and researchers define street children as both male and female who are under 18 years of age and spend most of their time in the streets. They maintain minimum or no contact with their families; they lack supervision, protection or guidance, which make them vulnerable to a wide range of health and psychological hazards. The legal definition seems to have long been affected by the “correctional approach” and the passive social outlook towards these criteria of children. Until the inception of the child Law 12 of 1996 (UN-ODCCP, 2000) the street children have historically been labeled and considered as ‘delinquents’, ‘vagrants’ and ‘juveniles exposed to delinquency’.

The child Law of 1996 defines cases of exposure to delinquency on the basis of types of activities children do, which include begging or selling trivial items, or performing shows or any activity which are meant to earn a living. The child law considers the child at risk of being exposed to their safety, moral, health or their life is endangered if the environment where the child is raised renders them vulnerable or deviant, either through exposure to drugs, alcoholism, violence or prostitution. In all the great towns and cities of developing countries street children are a common sight where they work, beg and at times steal. According to McPherson (1987) the estimates of the world population for abandoned street children was 100 to 200 million which concurs with the United Nation which has attributed its estimates at a population of 150 million street children world wide with the number steadily increasing. In Kenya according to Government of Kenya and UNICEF (1998) there are about 110,000 street children and they have been classified as being in special needs.

Street children are defenseless victims of brutal violence, sexual exploitation, abject neglect, and substance addiction and human rights violations. This concurs with Cockburn (1991) who claims that street children are the neglected, abused and rejected offspring’s of parents and communities benumbed by the minimal conditions of their lives and 80% of them have a history of abuse, physically, sexually and emotionally. Street children can be considered as one of the by-products of urbanization process in developing countries. These children struggle very hard for their survival on the streets like trumps they sleep wrapped up in newspapers, in alleyways or rubbish pits and according to Williams and UNICEF (1987) they begin life with no birth certificates and end it prematurely in unmarked graves.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to find out why the street children phenomenon persists and continues to increase. The specific objectives are: -

- To examine the factors which influence street children decision to leave home and school so that they can be on the streets.
- To investigate the attitudes of street children towards substance and drug abuse, truancy and Vagrancy.
- To identify policy actions which could help curb the street children phenomenon

Methodology

Sample Population

One hundred street children and six social workers were interviewed. The sample size was derived from the Nakuru Municipality mainly the urban centre. The street children were asked questions that were in the questionnaire and their answers were recorded. The street children were selected purposively in their popular hang outs within the urban centre.

Structured questionnaire was utilized to obtain data regarding the cause of children being in the streets and drugs and substance abuse. The street children were also requested to narrate their experience in the street and institution experiences. The major contents of the questionnaire were as follows:

- Back ground of the street children.
- Exposure to drugs and substance abuse and the frequency
- The reasons for being in the street.
- Institutional experiences for children off the streets.
- Future expectations

Results and Discussions

Age and Gender Composition of Children in the street

In the absence of a formal census, it is not possible to ascertain the accurate age or the gender synopsis of the street children in the municipality; however the study found out that 79% of the respondents were male while 21% were female. The category of street children below 6 years comprised 11% of the respondents where 7% were male and 4% were female as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Age and Gender Profile of the Respondents in Streets

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Age	6yrs under	Respondent	7	4	11
		% of Total	7.0%	4.0%	11.0%
	7 - 11	Respondent	22	4	26
		% of Total	22.0%	4.0%	26.0%
	12 & Over	Respondent	50	13	63
		% of Total	50.0%	13.0%	63.0%
Total		Respondent	79	21	100
		% of Total	79.0%	21.0%	100.0%

Twenty six percent of the respondents were between 7 years and 11 years whereby the male were represented by 22% and female formed 4%. The last category comprised of street children aged over 12years who formed 63% which constituted 50% and 13% percent male and females respectively.

Age and Gender Composition of Children off the street

In the data analysis it was established that the female form 12% of the children who are off the streets and have habitation in various institutions which are involved in rehabilitation while the male formed 88%. No child below the age of 6 years was interviewed but the category of children between the ages of 7 to 11 years constituted 4% of the respondents with each gender getting 2% of the responses. The bulk of street children off the streets are in the age category of above 12years which had 96% of the responses with the men and female having 86% and 10% respectively as shown in Table 2.

Table.2: The Age and Gender Profile of the Respondents off the Streets

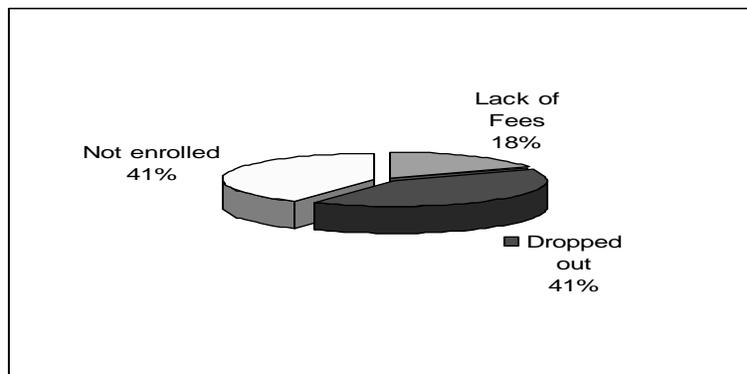
			gender		Total
			female	male	
Age	7-11	Respondents	1	1	2
		% of Total	2.0%	2.0%	4.0%
	12 years and over	Respondents	5	43	48
		% of Total	10.0%	86.0%	96.0%
Total		Respondents	6	44	50
		% of Total	12.0%	88.0%	100.0%

This study establishes that the male predominate the female in the street life. Though according to Baizerman (1988) the politics of numbers can hide or distort the moral issues in the street children phenomenon. However male predominate the streets due to the fact that females are generally protected by the society and are used more on domestic chores around the house and do not therefore have the time to be on the street.

Educational Level

The data analyzed from questionnaires and interviews revealed that the children in the streets were not in school at the moment because 41% had not enrolled in any school, 41% voluntarily dropped out of school and 18% were not in school because they lacked school fees as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Street Children School Attendance

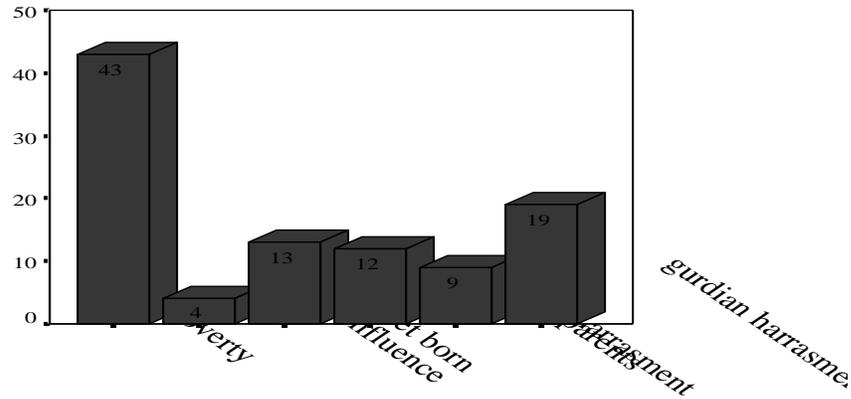


The educational level of the street children interviewed ranged from those who have never attended school to those who never completed their primary school education. The reasons advanced by the street children were 41% voluntary dropped out after playing truancy and absenteeism while 18% percent lacked the school fees. Forty one percent of the respondents did not enroll at to any school. This finding concur with Grundling *et al* (2009) that most of the street children are actually on the street rather than off the street and hence do not go to school. Poverty in this research is an underlying factor as it accounts for 18% of school drop out due to lack of school fees, however it can be argued that with the introduction of free primary education in Kenya, lack of school fees should not be a causal factor but the government does not provide the basic necessities like uniforms, lunch to students and even in some schools books are not catered for. This factor compounds the problem and hence the drop out rates tends to escalate.

Factors Causing Street Children Phenomenon

Poverty reflects the powerlessness to meet the outlay of common family requirements at home and the failure of the governments to supplement the families. This weakens the family bonds and the household head loses the moral authority over his family leading to break ups at home, divorce, separations and even the phenomenon of street children as children look for more autonomy as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Reasons for Streetism



Poverty accounted for 43% as the reason for leaving home by the street children interviewed, harassment by guardians and parents accounted for 19% and 12% respectively. Notably 13% of the respondents were street born and orphans accounted for 9%.

The Family Structure:

The concept of family is a key reference point when people conceptualize children and childhood. Street children are regularly earmarked as having no family or as being victims of family breakdown. The study establishes that 9% of the respondents had no parents and 12% left their home due to harassment by their parents while 19% were on the street for fear of being harassed by their guardians (Figure 2). Children who live outside their families are perceived as the deviant ‘other’, and thus the presence of children on city streets is regarded as a result of dysfunctional families according to Hagan & McCarthy, 1997.

Developing countries tend to refer to poverty and the weakening of the traditional family structure as the main reasons for the street children phenomenon which concurs with Akuffo, (2001) when he states that in almost all the street children’s backgrounds there tends to be an initial problematic relationship with their family and this has been affirmed by this study as shown in Figure 2.

Street Children Occupations

Street children rely on the public for their day to day existence, in Nakuru the street children phenomenon is characterized by children begging, stealing, directing motorists for parking spaces and even carrying luggages “beba”. The study found out that street children engage in a number of activities which define their occupation. It was established that 25% of the street children engage in begging for money and food while 61% were engaged in some form of work and 14% of the street children specialized in both begging and working to earn a livelihood as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Street Children Occupations

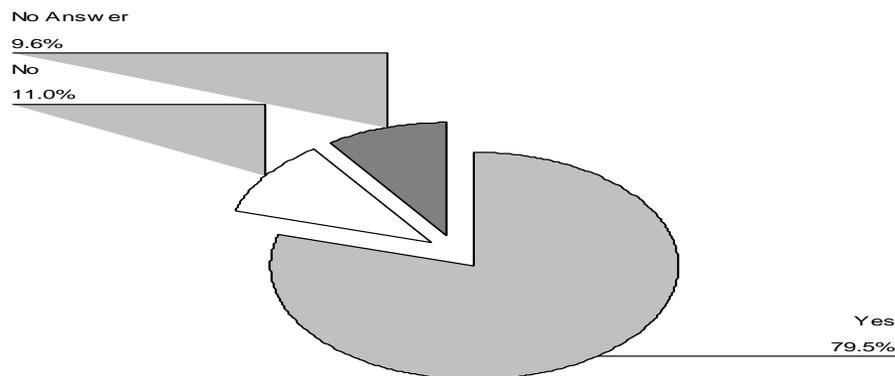
Street “Occupations”		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Begging	Count	13	12	25
	% of Total	13.0%	12.0%	25.0%
work	Count	55	6	61
	% of Total	55.0%	6.0%	61.0%
Work & beg	Count	11	3	14
	% of Total	11.0%	3.0%	14.0%
Total	Count	79	21	100
	% of Total	79.0%	21.0%	100.0%

The study established that majority of the girls are involved in begging activity which concurs with Swart (1988) who claims that in begging the girls play on the peoples guilty feelings. The scenario of street mothers begging on the street in the pretext of begging for their young ones is designed to loosen kindheartedly even the most rigid giver.

HIV/ AIDS and the street children Phenomenon

In the year 2000 the number of children in Kenya orphaned by AIDS was estimated at 1.2 million (Human Report Watch, 2001). Street children themselves are vulnerable to the scourge, their lifestyles and survival tactics expose them to high risk for contracting the disease, with sexual exploitation and substance abuse putting them at very high risk. The study established that 79.5% of the respondents were using drug substances which range from sniffing gum, cigarettes, illicit brew and even bang hence making them susceptible to the scourge as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Drugs and Substance Abuse

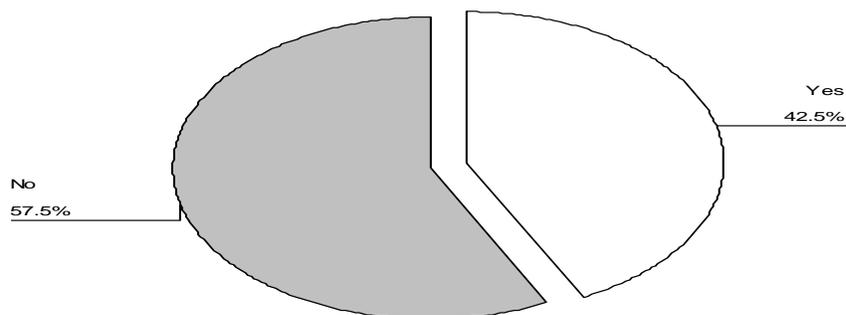


The street children in this study gave various reasons as to why they end up using and abusing drugs. Ignorantly most of them use drugs to feel “ire” that is a street slug for feeling “on top” or “delusion” and forgetting their real life situation. Most of these children in the street feel hungry, are smitten by cold at night with no shelter and therefore end up using drugs as the oblivious outlet to their predicament. Street motherhood is a common phenomenon of street children. Most of the children are sired by the street fathers while quite a number are sired by the general populace. This in itself is self evidence of the vulnerability of street life where Sexually transmitted diseases can rapidly spread and therefore compounding the phenomenon even more.

Actions Taken

Education is conceptualized in modern society as the vehicle that leads to a good profession whose outcome is beneficial to the whole society. Placing street children into institutions is seen as protecting society from budding criminals (Cunningham 1994) by giving them an education that will give them hope in the future. Several studies have highlighted the hostility of the general public towards street children in Kenya which stresses why children are institutionalised (Ruto, 1999).

The study found out that 42.5% of the respondents had been institutionalised but have succeeded to be back in the streets (Figure 4). This therefore re-emphasises that in Kenya the children homes are not the best of places for rehabilitating the street children because they lack the necessary facilities and manpower needed for rehabilitation.

Figure 4: Institutionalised Children Back on the Streets

The street children gave some varying reasons as to why they opt for the street as opposed to the homes. The reasons include mistreatment by social workers and their peers, lack of freedom and inadequate food and amenities. In the view of the social workers some of the street children are incorrigible and don't fit in this institutions prompting them to run away. The social workers also believe that the children go back to the streets since they crave for drugs and rehabilitating them becomes a big task

In the year 2003 the government tried to remove the street children out of the streets of the major cities and towns. The street children were rounded up and taken to the National Youth Service where they were supposed to be trained and imparted with skills that would help them to be better citizens and keep them out of the streets. Initially the plan through the office of the Vice President and Ministry of Home Affairs seemed to have been a solution to the street children situation in the country, but slowly the plan started to fail when the government could not afford to enroll more street children and street children themselves started to run away to avoid being rounded up. With time the streets were characteristically evident with street children, begging and ferrying goods, directing cars to parking lots and sniffing gum. Though the plan did not achieve its intended objective the first lot of street children to the National Youth Service has already graduated.

Kenya is a signatory to Convention on the Rights of the Child, (1989), which states in Article 27 of CRC that every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for his or her physical, moral and social development. The street children phenomenon in itself is a contradiction of the above since the children live in very deleterious conditions that subject them to inhumane living standards. The Kenyan Children Act 2001 (Palmqvist, 2006) stipulates that children have the right to know and be cared for by their parents, and gives parents the responsibility of providing their children with education, guidance, adequate diet, shelter etc. Due to an increase in living standards, coupled with many families living below the poverty line most families have not been able to provide these basic rights to their children. In some instances the street children have ended up in the street after being requested by their families to supplement their incomes.

Conclusions

The study concludes that there is a relationship between poverty and being a street child. The parents unable to fend for their families make the children to leave home gradually in the aim of meeting their basic needs and are eventually recruited to the street life. They are initiated to using drugs and doing some manual jobs as away of generating income for their subsistence

The study also establishes that juvenile delinquency and violence is a mirror reflection of what happens in the life of street children from their mistreatment at home and how they are abused by their peers in the streets. Rehabilitation efforts by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government agencies has not achieved much and hence there is a need to prepare a goal oriented programme for rehabilitating the children and provision of counseling services to parents and more so young mothers.

Recommendations

1. The citizenry must be sensitized to eliminate those factors that have led children onto the streets in the past in order to prevent the same from happening to those who are vulnerable of being street children. The family institution should be strengthened and the fight against HIV/AIDS heightened. Employment opportunities as pledged in government manifestos should be created so as to overcome poverty.
2. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) suggest that violence displayed by street youths usually stems from the physically abusive backgrounds that often produced them. Children living in our streets are citizens of our country, most of the times they are subjected to police and citizens brutality which is often reflected in their character. Let us not deprive them of love. Their rights as enshrined in the Kenya Constitution 2010 and in the children's Act 2001 must be respected, and they should receive assistance so that they can enjoy the full protection of the law.
3. In this country the Mass media has been a powerful voice of the oppressed and down trodden. But the institution has focused its attention to the political scene. The mass media must be used effectively in order to bring about sustained assistance for those children presently on the street, as well as to convey prevention messages targeting children contemplating going on to the street.
4. Children homes were introduced with the primarily goal of keeping the children off the streets and out of public sight. Efforts should be geared towards rehabilitating them and making them better citizens. Building relationships between street children, the police and the community may be a way forward in alleviating the grievances each group has towards the other and thus the society will not view the street children as social misfits and the children will feel as part of the community that is protected by the police force.

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