



A Study on Problems Faced by Street Children: A Study of Vadodara District

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the demographic characteristics, reasons for street involvement, challenges faced, and coping mechanisms of street children in the districts of Vadodara and Dabhoi, India. The research problem aims to highlight the humanitarian concerns, social and economic implications, and knowledge generation related to street children. The study utilized a descriptive and quantitative research design with 60 respondents selected through purposive sampling. Primary data was collected through survey questionnaires using the Likert scale and nominal scale, while secondary data was gathered from existing literature. The findings indicate a majority of street children are aged 6-15, predominantly from Vadodara, with a balanced gender distribution. Educational attainment is low, and many come from intact households but face challenges such as discrimination and exploitation. Coping mechanisms like seeking organizational assistance and forming support networks show resilience. The implications underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address the multifaceted needs of street children and facilitate their successful reintegration into society, emphasizing the importance of support systems and advocacy.

KEYWORDS:street children, Vadodara, Dabhoi, demographic characteristics, challenges, coping mechanisms, interventions.

INTRODUCTION:

Street children are defined as impoverished or destitute children who live and/or work on the streets, often lacking adequate protection and supervision. According to UNICEF, these individuals are under 18 years old, for whom the street serves as their habitual abode and/or source of livelihood. They face various dangers such as abuse, exploitation, and health issues. The term encompasses a broad range of situations, including children with strong connections to public areas. Street children are highly vulnerable and marginalized, encountering challenges in accessing essential services like education and healthcare. It's essential to distinguish between homeless children and street children, as not all street-connected children are necessarily homeless, and not all homeless children live on the streets. The typology of children's 'street-connectedness' focuses on understanding the nature of their relationships with the street environment, beyond mere activities or traits. It delineates between 'push' factors, driving children away from home due to issues like neglect or abuse, and 'pull' factors, attracting them to the streets for opportunities or relationships. Street-connectedness emphasizes enduring connections to or within the street environment, influenced by both push and pull forces.

Understanding street-connectedness requires tailored interventions acknowledging the complexity of these connections and addressing both push and pull factors shaping children's experiences on the streets. Street children often end up on the streets due to poverty, family breakdown, discrimination, and societal issues like domestic violence, economic hardships, urbanization, and lack of access to education. These vulnerable children face numerous challenges, including abuse, exploitation, and denial of basic rights. Globally, an estimated 150 million children live on the streets, with regions like Africa, Asia, and Latin America bearing the brunt of the crisis. Efforts to address this issue necessitate comprehensive strategies focusing on education, social support, and reintegrating children into mainstream society.

Street children engage in various forms of work to survive, including rag picking, street vending, and begging often facing exploitation, abuse, and hazardous conditions. Boys typically undertake labour-intensive jobs, while girls are more involved in domestic work and begging. Despite their involvement in work, many street children attend school, though balancing work and education is challenging. Some children showcase artistic talents to earn income. However, street work exposes children to risks such as physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, and involvement in criminal activities. Street children face numerous social, physical, and psychological challenges, including poverty, discrimination, violence, malnutrition, injuries, and mental health issues, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

Legal provisions and constitutional rights aim to protect vulnerable children, including street children, through entities like the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and adherence to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, despite constitutional safeguards,

street children face dire challenges such as poverty, exploitation, and lack of education. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including research to understand their plight and inform policy for their well-being and integration into society. The proposed research in Vadodara, Gujarat, seeks to identify challenges, resources, and potential strategies to improve the lives of street children, highlighting the societal commitment needed for their protection and future prospects.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Pathak, P., Ghosh, A., and Sharma, S. (2021). A Study on Sexual Abuse of Street Children. When there are concerns about a child's safety, they are in danger. Children are commonly seen as societal assets, and neglecting them will result in a loss for society. Street children are particularly exposed to abuse and exploitation. Their dangerous situations on the streets enhance the likelihood of paedophilia. Exploitation causes physical and psychological damage, making it one of the most dangerous forms of child labor. As a result, the study delves into street children's experiences with sexual abuse. Data was gathered through a semi-structured interview schedule. The analysis was conducted to interpret sexual abuse within the context of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act of 2012. The study discovered that street children were subjected to many forms of sexual abuse, ranging from groping their private areas to the presentation of pornographic material. Though there is special legislation to protect children from the offense of sexual abuse, street children are unable to obtain such protection due to their precarious living conditions. Any form of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse against children jeopardizes their scholastic, social, and psychological development. As a result, it is the society's responsibility to create and provide a safety net for the upbringing of these street children, as well as other vulnerable children. The study advises that the general public should be informed of the POCSO Act. Civil society should be strengthened so that street children may defend themselves from sexual abuse and seek justice in the event of such abuse. In this regard, the Street Children (Protection of Rights) Bill 2001 must also be passed. The National Commission for the Protection of Children's Rights plays an important role in protecting street children from abuse.

Life on the Street. Save the Children (Digital, n.d. 2019) Street children can be found throughout India, although little is known about their numbers or the living conditions in cities. Without statistics to inform policy decisions, interventions aimed at street children have failed to provide the expected results. This is the hole that this paper seeks to fill. It is based on extensive quantitative research, including a census of street children and a sample survey in five Indian cities, as well as qualitative data acquired through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

Street children in India: A Study of Their Access to Health and Education. (Dutta, 2018). Street life is a struggle for survival, particularly for youngsters. They live in the city but are unable to enjoy its amenities. This study focused on access to health care and education for children aged 6 to 18 living in the Indian metropolises of Mumbai and Kolkata. The study also attempted to assess the impact of social work interventions on the rights of street children. A blend of approaches for quantitative and qualitative research was used. To recruit 100 children, the random sample approach was used. Data was obtained one-on-one through a semi-structured interview and non-participant observation. According to the data, the primary cause of the increased number of street children is extreme poverty. Most children were excluded from school because their illiterate parents were unaware of educational options. It was complicated by issues such as a lack of educational opportunities at home. It was difficult for the students to work outside of the school grounds. Those who lived with their parents obviously had better access to health care facilities than those living alone; nonetheless, nongovernmental organizations worked hard to remedy this inequity, creating periodic health check-up camps. Although most children have lost their innocence as a result of early exposure to harsh reality, making them difficult to work with, nongovernmental organizations worked hard to assure kid participation and the development of individual identity. As a result, interventionists focused on developing a rights-based strategy rather than a charitable one.

"Street children and their activity spaces in Kolkata: A geographical appraisal" (Sarkar & Basu, 2017). A study on street children in urban environments in developing countries is a terrible byproduct of the growing urbanization trend. Each day, these children must deal with a new problem. To survive on the streets, they adopt or start a few various informal or even criminal enterprises in public 32 areas and form supportive social networks, whether they have family or not. Street children work, live, and play in varied urban environments that are appropriate for them. The livelihoods of young people living on the streets should be investigated in terms of the spaces they use based on their age and length of stay, i.e., the activity space. An activity is typically defined as the geographic area through which people move during their daily activities. It has to do with both space and time. The current study investigates the routine or everyday existence of urban street children in specific settings (activity spaces), i.e., their distinct lives and working strategies.

Preventing substance misuse among street children in India (Sharma & Joshi, 2013) observed that there has been relatively little research on substance abuse among street children in India, despite the fact that they account for a significant proportion of the population. The study examines methods for preventing substance abuse among street children in India. According to the current poll, 10% of the world's children live on the streets in India, with males accounting for more than two-thirds of the total. It was shown that the majority of street youth consume nicotine and alcohol. Poverty, peer pressure, and substance abuse were major reasons why the children were on the streets. Substance abuse affects vital organs, causing respiratory, digestive, dental, facial, and heart issues. The most serious social effects of substance abuse included HIV/AIDS, STIs, violence, and crime. The supplementary preventative program and policies, on the other hand, received attention in government and organizational publications. The survey's findings differed, as the study was done mostly in the country's urban areas. Special attention should be placed on eradicating poverty in the country and preventing substance abuse among street children via peer pressure. Furthermore, for the programmes to be sustainable, long-term resources and professional planning are essential.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

OBJECTIVES:

1. To identify the demographic characteristics of street children, including age, gender, education level, family background, and socio-economic status.
2. To explore the reasons why street children, end up on the streets, including poverty, family breakdown, abuse, and neglect.
3. To examine the risks and challenges that street children face, including physical and emotional abuse, exploitation, and social exclusion.

UNIVERSE, SAMPLE AND SAMPLING METHOD:

The universe comprises all survey components that are suited for inclusion in the research study. The universe comprises of all the Street children residing in the districts of Vadodara and Dabhoi. The sample consists of 60 (sixty) respondents residing in the districts of Vadodara and Dabhoi and were selected through a purposive sampling method in collaboration with DCPU (District Child Protection Unit)

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Researcher have adopted a questionnaire as the main tool for data collection.

FINDINGS

- The largest demographic is the 6-10 and 11-15 age group, comprising 63.4% of the total sample size, which suggests that this age bracket is the most prevalent among the surveyed individuals.
- The majority (48.3%) have completed primary school, while 41.7% have not received any formal education. A lesser fraction (6.7%) attended pre-primary school, while just 3.3% completed the middle stage of schooling.
- Summarizing the living arrangements of 60 participants, showing that 25.0% sleep on the streets, 18.3% stay in shelters or homeless institutions, and the rest (56.7%) live with friends or family.
- Specifically, 13.3% report having none of this category, 36.7% have 1-2 siblings, 35.0% have 3-4 siblings, and 15.0% have 5 or more siblings.
- The vast majority, 90.0%, said that both of their parents or guardians are still alive, while 10.0% stated otherwise.
- The majority (75.0%) of participants indicated poverty as the key factor. Family disintegration was indicated by 18.3% of participants, with a lesser proportion, 3.3%, mentioning independence or other causes.
- For the majority of participants, substance abuse (drug/alcohol) had little influence on their decision to live on the streets. Only 1.7% acknowledged the influence of substance misuse, while 98.3% said it had no impact.
- The results show the varied coping techniques used by people facing the emotional problems of living on the streets. A sizable proportion (41.7%) seek assistance from organizations, indicating a reliance on external support. Furthermore, 31.7% communicate with friends as a coping mechanism, while 26.7% participate in hobbies or activities.
- According to the findings, a considerable majority, 61.7%, of street children in the research reported being exploited for child labour or forced begging at some point, while 38.3% claimed not to have been exploited.
- The majority, 50.0%, get food from charities or shelters, emphasizing the importance of outside assistance in achieving basic necessities. Begging is another prominent means, cited by 43.3% of participants, underlining the need for community charity. Scavenging is used by a smaller percentage (5.0%), whereas 1.7% cite alternative ways.
- The data demonstrates the many tactics individuals use to stay safe and protect themselves while living on the street. The most commonly reported strategies include staying in groups (38.3%), seeking safe places to sleep (25.0%), and seeking help from adults or organizations (36.7%).
- A sizable majority, 60.0%, cited receiving help from others as a source of optimism. Furthermore, 23.3% expressed a desire for a better life, while 16.7% established little goals.
- A sizable proportion, 48.3%, expressed a desire for better living conditions, while 36.7% seek stable housing and family life. Furthermore, 15.0% have dreams about school and a career.
- According to the findings, 96.7% of participants believe society does not have an accurate knowledge of the issues that street children experience, while only 3.3% believe it does.
- The findings shed light on the regularity with which persons living on the streets experience emotions of loneliness or isolation. 50.0% reported having these feelings sometimes, 21.7% rarely, 15.0% never, 10.0% often, and 3.3% very often.
- The results demonstrate how frequently persons living on the streets experience hunger or food insecurity. Respondents reported 56.7% having it very often, 16.7% often, 8.3% sometimes and 18.3% rarely.

- 63.3% of respondents reported feeling criticized and stigmatized, 35.0% were regarded indifferently, and only 1.7% felt accepted and appreciated.

CONCLUSION

The study provides insights into the lives of street children, predominantly aged 6-15, with a concentration in Vadodara. Despite a balanced gender distribution, educational attainment is low, with most having only completed primary school or lacking formal education. While many hail from intact households, significant portions come from single-parent families or are orphans. Economically, a sizable fraction is self-employed, yet a concerning number sleep on the streets or in homeless shelters. The study reveals pervasive challenges including discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. Coping mechanisms such as seeking organizational assistance or forming support networks demonstrate resilience. Despite aspirations for reintegration into society through education and employment, barriers like resource scarcity and societal stigma persist. Urgent interventions are necessary to address their multifaceted needs and enable successful reintegration, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive support systems.

SUGGESTIONS

The findings regarding street children reveal a significant presence of children aged 6-15, with the majority hailing from Vadodara, highlighting the importance of location-specific considerations. While many lack formal education and face family disintegration, others come from intact households, showcasing varied family dynamics. Living arrangements vary, with some residing on the streets or in shelters while others have support from friends or family, emphasizing the need for robust support networks. Street children encounter numerous challenges, including poverty, discrimination, and abuse, often coping by seeking assistance from organizations or relying on social networks. Despite adversities, many express optimism and aspirations for a better life, underscoring the importance of addressing their needs and providing opportunities for education and employment. However, barriers such as lack of resources, opportunities, and fear of rejection hinder efforts to leave street life, highlighting the complexities of reintegrating into society. Additionally, a significant proportion perceives unjust treatment from authorities, indicating the need for improved relations and support from law enforcement. While awareness of support programs exists, it remains limited among street children, underscoring the importance of outreach efforts and collaborative initiatives involving government agencies, NGOs, communities, and other stakeholders to provide comprehensive support and opportunities for street children to thrive and reintegrate into society.

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