



Factors Related to the Growth of at-Risk Homeless Street Youth

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ABSTRACT:

There is a challenge for street youth across the world. It is an everyday social reality and an eyesore that cannot be ignored. Streetism is not a straightforward issue. It is instead a very complex and persistent issue. The street youth phenomenon is also visible in Zambia in both towns and cities, especially in the capital city of Lusaka. The fundamental inquiry concerns the factors that trigger children to leave their homes and resort to living in the open spaces of cities. Since the streets present themselves as risky and/or dangerous, inquiry into why youth would make them their abode should be important to governments, social welfare activists, society in general, and the church. A knowledge of such factors should aid policymakers, governmental and non-governmental organizations, charities, and faith-based organizations to work towards the reduction and prevention of this predicament to whatever extent possible.

Key Words: Homelessness, Street Children, Street Youth, At-risk, Ministry, Poverty, Streetism, Urban Missions

1.1 Introduction

Scholars and academicians have been intrigued by this question for years. This academic interest has led to several works that attempt to find answers to the different elements that hinge on the street youth problem. Thousands of works can be found around this issue. In this contribution, we discuss the causative factors of streetism in urban life. Streetism 'Streetism' is a relatively new term that means "living on the streets or being off the streets" Marcus Lyon (2019). It is sometimes used to describe street children, especially in Anglophone Africa. Apparently, in the area of Applied Theology and Urban Missions, the everyday challenges of the city emerge as opportunities for creative and compassionate ministry. It is unwise though to respond to the predicament of vulnerable street youth before looking at the root cause. Those who wish to delve into ministry to offer relief to at-risk homeless street youths should do so from an informed point of view in which the "why" question of streetism is looked into. This study therefore examines literature and thought around the predisposing factors to children and youth that compel them to leave their homes into perilous city streets.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

There is a visible growing presence of at-risk homeless youth on the streets of Lusaka, Zambia. These homeless youth can be seen loitering, begging, gambling, and even using illicit substances in public. This observable phenomenon is a cause for concern. The children living on Zambia's streets continue to reflect a societal problem that requires inquiry. What causes children to leave home and dwell in the risky and unprotected open spaces of urban centers should be at the center of inquiry before any meaningful interventions can be embarked upon.

1.3 Methodology

Archival study approach. I have used scholarly sources to investigate the causative factors of the insistent street youth phenomenon.

1.4 Results and Discussion

The following sections contain the results and discussion:

1.5 Street Youth Defined

The United Nations (UN, 2024) offers a specific definition of youth in general as "a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence." The term street youth has been defined in various ways. To begin with, other terms are used interchangeably to refer to street youth. These are street children and street kids. According to Ploeg and Scholte (1997), the expression - street youth, can also be defined as "those youngsters who have no roof over their head and sleep every night on the street." Similarly, children who generally, loiter, beg, scavenge, and engage in all sorts of

illegal or even illegal activities minus supervision are street youth. Thus, about this people group, we may speak of street youth, street children, or street kids. At-risk youth therefore refers to young people who face challenges as they transition into adult life. They often are victims of circumstances in which they find themselves.

1.6 Street Youth at-risk

Risk generally refers to a situation involving exposure to some sort of danger. An at-risk youth is a child who has a lower chance of attaining a successful childhood. The entire idea of street youth being at risk nuances their being exposed to danger, harm, or loss. These risks include but are not limited to mental illness, car accidents, loss of personal effects, attacks from gangs, being wrongly accused, abduction, intoxication, drug overdose, depression, early pregnancy, and unprotected sex. Phiri (1996) deliberating on the Zambian scenario has noted that street children "are considered noisy, highly visible, problem-causing young people. They are mostly perceived as youngsters whose survival lifestyle is irritating to everyone, and embarrassing to politicians. Their presence provokes negative reactions which range from anger to fear." Thus, they also risk mistreatment and prejudice by society.

1.7 Homelessness

Cities and their residents face tremendous issues as the world becomes more urbanized. One of these crises is homelessness. Since street youths are by and large homeless. It is important to tackle this predicament. Homelessness has been characterized and described in various ways with time. For the sake of this work, homelessness will be defined in terms of street youth, the group of people being studied. Homelessness is defined as the absence of a permanent residence. When certain events or circumstances prevent someone from having shelter, they become homeless, which means they do not have a home in which to shelter from the elements of weather during the day or at night. Thus, Hideo Aoki (2020) observes that "the street homeless are people who do not have permanent and fixed houses, who do not have relatives with whom they can live, and who live alone or in a family unit on the streets."

As in many African countries, homelessness is a common occurrence in Zambia, notably in Lusaka. Children are forced to live on the streets as a result of poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Thus, children and teens who wind up on the streets for several causes become homeless and seek sanctuary there. Because citizens deserve and have the right to shelter, the presence of homeless individuals may be interpreted as a symptom of a dysfunctional social system or a government failing to fulfill one of its primary tasks (Kennett and Marsh, eds. 1999). Unfortunately, homelessness breeds several other problems. Holbrook, Sheryl A., and Montagno, eds, (2009) have also noted this when they argue that, "We cannot speak of homelessness without speaking of drugs, mental health, health care generally, redundancies, migration patterns, affordable housing, government housing policy, wars internal and external, gentrification, and so on." Thus, the problem of homelessness is caused by a complicated combination of causes, which brings with it a slew of other challenges.

1.8 Factors that lead to Street Youth

Youth do not just move into the streets. There are specific causes, stressors or triggers that prompt such a movement. Factors range from social, political, economic, and other diverse reasons. Agnelli (1986) offers a reminder that circumstances beyond their control force street children to live on the margins of the adult world. It therefore follows that movement to the streets is often precipitated by some cause. The following section ventures to outline and discusses in detail these factors:

1.8.1 Urbanization

According to UNICEF (2012), seven out of ten people on the planet will live in cities by 2050. UNICEF focused on children's interactions with the urban environment in 2012 to raise awareness of the difficulties that persistent urbanization might provide for kids. As things stand, urbanization will only keep growing in the direction that trend-spotters anticipate. In short, the world is abandoning the rural concept and embracing the urban rapidly. This rapid urbanization has become evident in Africa. However, because the African concept of family did not allow for the neglect of either children or the needy, it is the rush to metropolitan centers that has destroyed the historic tradition of an integrated African community. Strobbe, Olivetti and Jacobson (2011) also recognize that the African extended family was the primary social security system in which members were in charge of protecting the weak, caring for the destitute and sick, and passing down traditional social values and education. As has been brought to the fore, the disruption of this original way of life sets in motion a fertile ground for the flourishing of streetism.

Urbanization has caused the disintegration of the African society to a greater degree. Agnelli (1986) posits that "to a large extent, the fundamental causes of urban crisis in developing countries lie in the immemorial hardships of the small farmer, and the consequent flight from the land." It would appear that the peasant or small farmer has had to weather various challenges and difficulties. Peasants are smallholders or agricultural laborers of low social status. In Africa, these patronize the outskirts of cities and towns. They usually grow their food as well as limited cash crops to generate income for their livelihood. Consequently, life in rural settings becomes hard. The only way of escape therefore is to rush into the city which is deemed as offering the solution and relief from the rural predicament.

When discussing the phenomenon of street youth in developing countries we should acknowledge that they are the product of rural-to-urban migration. It therefore follows that urbanization, the process of making areas more urban, has created an environment lucrative to the growth of a culture of street living. For many street dwellers, the city and its streets are seen not as a problem but as the solution to many problems. Sauv  (2003) also reiterates the

idea that families that leave the rural for the urban looking for work and opportunity end up abandoning or losing their children to the streets. Their connection to their larger and extended family is severed. In the original setting, African families had close ties between great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, nephews, cousins, and children. Urbanization has altered this way of life.

1.8.2 Poverty

As hinted above, there is higher poverty in rural areas than in urban centers. Having said so, it is important to note the connection between poverty and the phenomenon of street youth. By and large, the poverty in the world naturally positions the less privileged (have nots) on the fringes of society. One of the primary factors contributing to the proliferation of street kids is poverty. The World Bank (2024) observes that “About 700 million people live on less than \$2.15 per day, the extreme poverty line. Extreme poverty remains concentrated in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, fragile and conflict-affected areas, and rural areas.” In the Sub-Saharan Africa, economic challenges tend to drive young people onto the streets.

Families living in impoverished conditions often struggle to provide basic necessities for their children, including food, shelter, and education. Marger (2007) posits that “It is generally accepted that the poor in society are those who are unable to acquire the necessities of life. No one would argue that a basic diet, shelter from the elements, access to minimal health care, and a few articles of personal property such as clothing are essential, that anything less constitutes poverty.” Economic hardships force parents to prioritize survival over their children's well-being, leading some children to seek refuge on the streets. Additionally, families facing financial difficulties may resort to sending their children to work in informal sectors or begging on the streets to supplement household income. As Marger (2007) observes, poverty is not the same everywhere. Similarly, the World Bank (2019) has added that poverty can be clustered as extreme or moderate (relative). Further, according to the World Bank (2019), “The number of extremely poor people continues to rise in Sub-Saharan Africa while falling rapidly in all other regions.” While impoverished nations do not only produce street adolescents, poverty is exacerbated in developing countries by political unrest, violence, disease, abuse, and other factors, which puts a strain on many families and leads to their dissolution. The following factor emanates from poverty and connects single parenting to divorce.

1.8.3 Divorce and Single Parenting

A single parent is a parent who cares for children without the assistance of other parents in the home (Olaleye and Oladeji 2010). It is a common phenomenon globally. While at given times children are born outside wedlock and a single parent has to grapple with raising kids alone, marriage may fail to work leaving one parent to fend for their children. Divorce is therefore a problem that leads to single parenting. Couples separate and end their marriage alliances for various reasons. Melgosa and Melgosa (2016) list communication problems, authority problems, unrealistic expectations, and sexuality issues as causes of divorce. Other reasons may include repeated conflict and disagreements or a sheer lack of compatibility. Sudden death and desertion also account for why some are single parents. Poverty can also trigger disharmony in families. Due to poverty, for instance, some couples get their relationships strained to the point of divorce and thereafter, single parenthood emerges. Single parents may then struggle to fend for their children. Thus, Ball (1996) links poverty, divorce, and single parenting. He shows how divorce splits families thereby causing income problems that push children to take the route of the street for sustenance. It has also been noted that women are at greater risk for poverty than when they were in marriage (Olaleye and Oladeji 2010). Pantell, Fries, and Vickery (2002) also weigh in when they assert that divorce represents a loss to children often accompanied by a loss in the financial status of the working mother.

1.8.4 Abuse, Family Neglect, and Violence

Flowers and Flowers (1996) take the position that “Abuse and family violence are blind to age, social status, color, culture and creed.” They must therefore be viewed as a global predicament since both the developed and developing nations experience them. As observed by Agneli, Street kids can be seen as a result of broken families, deprivation, violence and fear. Ball (1996) explains that other than the dilemma of single parenting, numerous other domestic conditions occasioned by “poverty, abuse, or neglect” literally saw the banishing of children from home. These conditions included harsh treatment at home, penury, drunkenness by parents, parental fury due to failure by children to complete home chores, encouraging children to go out and beg, neglect due to parental employment outside the home, and lack of a comprehensive day care system. It is therefore probable that once the mother, father or guardian neglect a child, that child will seek refuge away from home. The streets thus become an option of refuge for many children. Makombe (1992) connects poverty and urbanization to child neglect when, reflecting on the Zambian and Zimbabwean street youth challenge he says, “In Zambia and Zimbabwe, urbanization and poverty have resulted in some parents abandoning or neglecting their children because they cannot support them.”

Why would any parent neglect their child? It's a bad idea to assume that becoming pregnant in any way indicates a desire to raise the child that will eventually be born. Unwanted pregnancy might be the consequence of carelessness or unintentional intercourse observes Archard (2004). It follows therefore that an unwanted pregnancy that is sustained until delivery will only bring forth unwanted children who become rejected, abused, and neglected by their biological parents. It would occur therefore that the manifestation of street children in various places is a result of parental neglect. If the mother, and or father, neglects their child, the only available option is probably establishing a new family on the streets.

1.8.5 Unemployment and Alcohol Abuse

The state of having no paid work places a strain on families. To a large extent, family livelihood is an important factor in determining the destiny of children. Wyn and White (1997) note that “Young people in other parts of the world have always had an important role to play in ensuring the family's

livelihood. However, not all young people are affected by unemployment in the same way.” In Africa, unemployment is a big issue. This is the reason why young people in African society play an important role in the securing of family income. Alongside this challenge comes its attendant ill of child labor since the child must contribute to ensuring that resources are brought into the family. Child labor implies labor that in one or the other deprives a child of their childhood. It is worth noting that child labor mentally, physically, socially, and morally affects children and youth. Initially, children may carry sundry goods for sale in the city. In the long run, these children become exposed to the luring streets and their attendant life. This exposure to street life creates an appetite for adventure and independence. Thus, children end up becoming street-based.

Lewis (1998) underscores the characteristics of homes where street youth emerge from. He states that they “. . . come from disorganized, underdeveloped and stressed communities. There is a high rate of unemployment, inadequate housing and alcohol abuse in their families. Food is always in short supply.” He observes the impact of disorganized homes, unemployment, deficient housing as well as the problem of domestic alcohol abuse as fundamental stressors. Not only does alcohol abuse lead to emotional and/or physical abuse of children, but it also causes instability in the home where there is little to no food, which forces children to gravitate towards the streets to fend for themselves. Initially, they may seek refuge at a known relative's place, but they are headed straight towards the streets. Often what transpires is that income that is supposed to be used for food and other necessities is used to satisfy the craving for liquor. Once parents or guardians take this course, an environment detrimental to the livelihood of children is fostered, and the result is almost always determined – the disadvantage of the children. Unfortunately, children who are raised amidst drug and alcohol abuse end up copying the use of liquor and other harmful substances. Finally, when they end up on the street, they fall to unrestrained consumption of all kinds of harmful substances.

1.8.6 Juvenile Delinquency

Among the stresses that youth face are a lack of housing and other supports, poverty, youth unemployment and underemployment, a decline in local government authority, overcrowding in impoverished urban areas, family breakdown, and inadequate educational systems. The idea that youths are on the streets merely because of abuse or lack of family cohesion is not necessarily true. Ruddick (1996) shows that while some youth will move to the streets due to family pressures, others go into the streets because they want to have some fun. Having fun is one factor in attracting homeless youth to different parts of the country. Since the streets provide some sort of independence and guarantee freedom in lifestyle choices by the youth, it is an attraction to many including those who are neglected and desire escape from abuse. Whenever children feel confined or overly restricted, their inquisitive adolescent nature ventures on the path of adventure that might include familiarity with the street.

1.8.7 Accusations of Witchcraft

Accusations of witchcraft should be taken into consideration as a contributing element in certain regions of Africa. It is important to remember that a lot of people in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, believe in witchcraft. Several nations have this difficulty, such as Zambia, Nigeria, Angola, and Congo. According to Cimpric (2010), after experiencing abuse and violence in the family home, children who are accused of witchcraft are either forced to flee or are abandoned by their families. They may also experience violent acts within churches. Many abandoned kids wind up on the streets of Africa's major cities. From the aforementioned, it is clear that abandoned or rejected youngsters who are suspected to be wizards find safety in the streets.

1.8.8 HIV/AIDS

Mandalazi, Banda, and Umar (2013) deliberating on the Malawian Street Kids dilemma observe that a growing number of urban children are growing up on the streets as a result of the pandemic of HIV and AIDS, the disintegration of extended families, and worsening economic situations. They bring to the forefront the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. So, while the African extended family is disintegrating, and the economies are declining, there remains a health issue whose devastating effects speak to the rising population of at-risk street youth. Often when children lose their parents to HIV/AIDS, they remain orphans. In their orphaned state, there emerges the problem of stigma. They are shunned on account of their parents who fell prey to HIV/AIDS. At given times the surviving children themselves may be carriers of HIV. However, even if they do not carry HIV, they are ostracized and shunned. Relatives as well as community members and neighbors do not wish to associate with persons connected to anyone who was known to have, or was believed to be HIV positive. Stigma thus refers to the negative attitudes and beliefs that people have toward those who are perceived as carriers or connected to carriers of HIV, deceased or alive. It is often this predicament that pushes some unwanted children into the streets to originate their livelihood. This survival mechanism is thus precipitated primarily by the HIV/AIDS and secondarily by neglect owing to stigmatization.

1.9 Conclusion

The street youth phenomenon is a complex social issue shaped by a myriad of interconnected factors, including socioeconomic matters, family dysfunction, urbanization, poverty, divorce and single parenting, abuse, family neglect and violence, unemployment and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency, accusations of witchcraft, and HIV/AIDS the disintegration of the extended family ethic, and the HIV/AIDS challenge. There are other factors as well which may be discussed. However, while most factors push youth into the streets such as urbanization, factors such as delinquency pull them into the streets. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that combines poverty alleviation strategies, family support programs, urban planning initiatives, and comprehensive child protection policies among other strategies. By understanding the root causes of the street youth phenomenon

and implementing targeted interventions, policymakers, urban missiologists, churches and ministries, social workers, and communities can work together to create a safer and more inclusive environment for vulnerable children.

Recommendations

The following are actions that should be taken based on the findings of this study:

- Offering free counseling programs to parents who migrate from rural areas to cities, particularly those residing in slums and temporary shelters, is crucial for sensitizing them to the risks of exposing their children to street life.
- Governments and care organizations should partner to implement comprehensive programs targeting alcoholic parents, aiming to support their withdrawal while preventing the transmission of substance abuse habits to children and mitigating the risk of them turning to the streets where drugs and alcohol are prevalent.
- Governmental and non-governmental organizations interested in working with street youth to consider providing hands-on skills that are income-generating in nature. This will inspire a greater desire for economic benefit away from the streets.
- Church organizations and other charities that thrive on the provision of temporary relief such as food, clothing, and water to grow their intervention further by providing shelter and rehabilitation programs.
- Family planning medications should be readily available, and freely provided, in health institutions to prevent unwanted pregnancies
- Sensitization by governmental and educational institutions against the stigma of HIV/AIDS victims should be embedded in primary and high school curricula to cultivate a stigma-free culture

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