

# Problems Experienced by Adolescent Street Children in Harare

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**Abstract-** This study is part of a broad research that sought to establish the counseling needs of adolescent street kids and in Harare Central Business District. This paper looks at the major problems experienced by adolescent street children in Harare streets. The representative sample drawn comprised of 40 street kids who were receiving some assistance from four non-governmental organizations and 8 officials from the organizations. A qualitative descriptive survey was used to guide the methodology. Data was collected using questionnaires and structured interviews for officials and the street kids respectively. Qualitative data analysis with descriptive statistics was used in the presentation and analysis of data. The study found out that the children faced problems with the Zimbabwe Republic Police and municipal police. There was also rampant bullying that was experienced by street kids. The study recommended the need to establish supervised 'safe houses' near city center that do not seem to relegate street children to areas where they should work for their upkeep. The police need to be conscientised of the need to treat the street children humanly and not treat them as criminals.

**Index Terms-** street kids, non- governmental organisations, counselling, counselling needs, Harare

## I. INTRODUCTION

Children who live in the streets survive outside the confines of the home where there are parents who provide nurturing and guidance. It is unusual and out of the norm for a child below the age of majority to be found living alone fending for himself or herself. The phenomenon of children living in the streets is a recent one in Zimbabwe. It surfaced only after the advent of independence. According to Muchini and Nyandiya-Bundy(1991) municipal by-laws were so ruthlessly applied that they would not tolerate the slightest signs of loitering which is characteristic of street kids. In support Grier (1996) states that in Zimbabwe during the colonial era, it was impossible for children to work in the streets as the municipal by-laws restricted this and were strictly and brutally enforced. This was a time when there was a lot of repression and suppression of the indigenous people such that they were forbade to be found at certain places like the city centre unless they were on duty. The City of Harare has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of adolescent street children in the last few years. This paper explores the major problems experienced by these children as they dwell in the streets.

## 1.2 The Research Question

What are the major problems experienced by adolescent children in the City of Harare?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of street kids

Research distinguishes between two different groups of street children. The classification is basically based on the degree of contact between the child and his or her family. The two categories comprise of children "of" the streets and completely lost contact with their families and relatives. These ones sleep and depend entirely on the streets. Children "on" the streets are those who are still maintaining contact with their families. Children "on" the streets can be divided further into those who come into the streets daily to beg and do odd jobs going back to their families at the end of their day and those who work in the streets and periodically visit their families (Rurevo and Bourdillon, 2003).

The Child Protection and Adoption Act (1996) of Zimbabwe consider children less than eighteen years in two categories a child and a young person. A child is considered to be any person under the age of sixteen years and includes an infant. A young person is considered to be any person who has attained the age of sixteen but has not attained the age of eighteen years. In this study the term child is going to be considered as any person who has not attained the age eighteen, it will therefore include a young person.

The concept 'street children' and/or 'street kid' according to Michaleon (2006) encompasses any child or adolescent under the age of eighteen who works and/or lives in the street alone or with his or her family or asylum seekers who are technically homeless and without support. In Zimbabwe the phenomenon of asylum seekers who come in large numbers was last experienced during the times when there was instability in Mozambique. This group of children is not included in the present study.

However, in the present study the concepts of 'street children' or 'street kids' are used to mean the same as was adopted by Rialp (1991) at The Inter-Non Governmental Organisation Conference in Switzerland which regarded them as,

*"...boys and girls who have not yet reached adulthood for whom the street has become their habitual abode and/or source of livelihood and who are inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults."*

The concept and the definition will apply to both categories of children discussed above. In the context of this study “boys and girls who have not yet reached adulthood” mean those children who have not yet attained the age of eighteen, which is the legal age of majority in Zimbabwe. When under the age of eighteen children are therefore legally considered to be minors and should be dependent on adults for most of their needs. These adults could be parents, relatives or other people who can legally be responsible for the needs of these children.

## **2.1 Problems experienced by street kids**

The problems that street kids have come from the manner in which they stay with other street kids, their relationship with the various authorities, the community perceptions and vagaries of the environment. The subsequent sections discuss the street-kids interrelationships, relationships with authorities and community perceptions on street kids.

### **2.1.1. Street kids interrelationships**

The street kids seemed to face serious relationship problems with each other. The major problems were to do with territoriality. They had divided the city into territories where one should not encroach without the permission of the owner of the territory. The Herald of 12 April 2008 had a story of Tanya who claimed the area near the Africa Unity Square Park in Harare to be hers. She had apparently succeeded in repulsing intrusion into this territory by a group of boys who had wanted to take it from her. From that instance she claimed complete ownership of that area.

Not all street kids might be as strong as Tanya. Karombo (2005) said most of the street children survived frequently by their rapid reflexes and a swift pair of feet that kept the inhabitants of that shadowy world out of really serious trouble. In Brazil the situation was even worse. The police claim that murders of street children by ‘death squads’ of other street children especially in Rio de Janeiro were quite common since some of the street children were employed to carry out dangerous activities by other street children (Swart, 2000). In one incident a nine year old boy in Ipanema (Brazil) was found killed and when his body was found, there was a note tied to his hand which said, ‘I killed you because you had no future.’ In the streets they seemed to operate and implement their own code of conduct that had to be followed by everyone in the group. If anyone tried to go against the street laws the individual was given relevant punishment.

In an effort to protect themselves from bullies usually the street kids who would be weaker formed gangs that helped each other repulse the intrusion into their territory. When someone new came into the territory he or she had to become affiliated to at least one of the groups for protection. Girls usually paid for their protection by giving sexual favours to boys from the stronger groups otherwise they would live a life of constant harassment (Karonbo, 2005). At times the girls also teamed together and helped each other so that they did not give in to the sexual demands of any member of the street gangs they did not recognise. Some groups had a leader who had to give consent to whatever sexual relationships that would be going on and had the power to even break some of the relationships if there was

someone who was taking an unfair advantage over the other (Cambell,1991).

### **2.1.2. Relationships with authorities**

In Zimbabwe the authorities that were in constant touch with the street children were the State Police(The Zimbabwe Republic Police in Zimbabwe), the Municipal Police, The Department of Social Welfare and some non-governmental organizations.

The Zimbabwe Republic Police usually rounded up the street kids accusing them of loitering and prostitution in the case of girls. Kokota (2010) said in the raids made by the police the streets where street children were beaten up with some being left for dead. The ones that were taken to the police station were subjected to numerous acts of brutality with girls being forced to have sex with the police officers in return for freedom. Those who did not comply were eventually sent to Mbuya Nehanda Holding Camp which was meant to be a ‘safe home’ but the conditions there were even worse as there was no food and the conditions there were so poor that very few children had stayed there for more than three months. Most of the street children who were taken there soon found their way back into the streets.

The police during these raids took away the street children’s blankets and all of their belongings that were usually stuck in drainage ways and other hiding places. When their blankets had been taken the street kids were then forced to use drugs in order to shield themselves from the cold nights and the biting mosquitoes at night (Mc Veigh, 2010).

The municipal police according to Karombo(2010) were the most feared by the street children. This was because they were hard to evade since in most cases they came when they were not in uniform. The street kids all the same had devised alarm systems of alerting each other of the presence of the municipal police as when they moved their vehicles had designated points where they parked. When they were around the street kids had to hide to avoid being arrested.

In Tanzania, Kanjii (1996) put that the street kids suffered from the unsympathetic bureaucracies who when they want to regulate their activities did so without understanding the needs of the concerned street kids. The practice of rounding up the children, screening them for criminals and then sending the remainder to ill equipped and poorly funded ‘safe houses’ was counterproductive. It only resulted in hardening the street kids and making them employ more effective ways of evading the police.

### **2.1.3. Community perceptions on street kids**

The street kids had to continually endure the negative perceptions that the community had towards them. The members of the community detested the sight of the street kids who were in most cases dirt and unkempt on top of that asked for money and scavenged for food in bins.

In Nepal, Baker (1998) found people were not amused by the behavior street kids who would want to be paid for people to park their cars at places that they regarded as theirs. This was especially so when they considered that the street kids had connections with car thieves. Failure of the people to pay the street kids the money they wanted usually resulted in burglary in their cars. This forced the people to put pressure on the authorities to take action on the street kids.

In Zimbabwe large restaurants like Chicken Inn had adopted a practice of keeping their bins clean and empty in an attempt to discourage the street children from visiting. This was because when the street children visited their premises they harassed their clients by their constant begging.

Some unscrupulous people men took advantage of the girls and sexually abused the young girls for very little money. The perceptions of the men towards the street girls was however still negative as they made the street children first take a bath before having sex with them (Kokota, 2010). This indicated that the men already considered negatively the street kids but they just want to get cheap sexual gratification.

The public viewed children to be competent only for playing and learning under the control of adults. When some children did not fit that paradigm, others become uncomfortable and readily judged the children and their situation anti-social. Where children worked for an income, even when it was for the benefit of their families, child labour was condemned. Poor and desperate children appearing on the streets spoiled the image of their city that was well managed and the children were blamed. The street kids were usually referred to as thieves. They thought they were violent and they did not pay attention to their personal circumstances that brought or motives that drove them into the streets. It was quite common to hear people say;

*'These children are just lazy and unemployable. They do not want to work. They would rather have easy money. Nothing good comes from these street kids'*

Or

*'Most children from poor families are working as domestic maids so why should they just come and sit in the streets'*

These showed that the community viewed the street kids as children who had lost direction who did not want to live under the confines of acceptable authority (Ennew, 1994). They trivialized the underlying factors that pushed these children in the streets.

It was therefore imperative that this study took a position of exploring possible ways of changing the community's perceptions towards the street children so that whatever initiatives that were taken involved the street children. Previous studies had just identified the problems faced by the street children and imposed solutions to them without consulting them. This study's main thrust was on empowering the street child so that he/she was in a position of ownership to the solution of the problems that they had.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design. This method was used as the researchers felt it was the most ideal for the study. The descriptive survey research designs are defined by their methodical collection of standardized information from any representative sample of the population (Christensen, 1994). In addition, this research design suits the context under which the present study was taken as the survey represents a probe into a given state of affairs that exists at a given time. The sample comprised of ten randomly selected children from each of the four purposively selected organizations that deal with street children. The organizations were selected due to their visibility in

dealing with street children. The children were selected by dividing the children who were present on the day the researchers visited into two groups of boys and girls and then randomly picking five children from each group who would participate in the research. The sample of those who work with children was purposively selected so that at each of the four organizations one participant came from the administration and the other came from field workers. These deal directly with the street children. Questionnaires were administered to the officials while the street children were interviewed. In order to ensure obtaining reliable and valid results a pilot study of the questionnaire and the interview guide was conducted at SOS Children's Home in Waterfalls. Qualitative data analysis with descriptive statistics was used to present and analyse the data.

## IV. RESULTS

### 4.1 Demographic data

**Table 1. Response Rate**

Group	Proposed Number	Actual Number	Response Rate (%)
Organisation Officials	8	8	17
Street Children	40	40	83
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

All the questionnaires given to officials were completed and collected on the day interviews with street children were being carried out. All the street children identified to participate in the interview responded to all questions asked by the researchers.

**Table 2: Problems Experienced**

Type of Problem	Males	Females	Total
Sleeping	15	20	35
Police	12	18	30
Clothes	10	16	26
Where to keep their belongings	15	20	35
Bullies	8	18	26
Education	10	8	18
Food	8	15	23
Scolded by members of community	8	10	18

The children reported that sleeping and where to keep their belongings presented the biggest challenge to them. This was followed by the harassment by the police.

## V. DISCUSSION

In the streets children faced problems centered on territoriality with other street children, continuous harassment by the police and the community perceptions on the presence of street kids. The problems that bothered street children were

where to sleep(100%), where to keep their belongings(100%), police harassment(86%), clothing(75%), bullying(75%) and being scolded by members of the community(51%).

Bullying and territoriality are problems that street children confront everyday. The bullying in Zimbabwe has not reached the levels of Brazil where there are 'death squads'. This may in part due to the heavy presence of the police which the street kids detest which kept bullying under check.

The police were feared because when the police rounded up the street children the conditions the children were subjected to, were very frustrating. They had to undergo a criminal screening process and sent to 'safe houses' at Mbuya Nehanda Centre. The centre was characterized by ill-treatment and hunger such that most children soon after being rounded up found their way back into the streets.

The problems of the street kids with the police call for strong advocacy campaigns to be carried with the police so that the police treated the street kids humanly and not in an accusing manner. These children were only an indication that something was wrong in our society and not that these children were a problem. There was need to find out what caused the children to go into the streets and address those issues instead of just bundling up the children and sending them to 'safe houses'.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) There is need to establish supervised 'safe houses' near city center that do not seem to relegating the street children to areas where they should work for their upkeep.

(ii) The police need to be conscientised of the need to treat the street children humanly and not treat them as criminals.

(iii) There is need for the girls to be taught of the dangers of prostitution as it related to HIV and AIDS.

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