

Psychosocial, demographic, educational and health characteristics of street children – a qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: More and more children are being pushed on the street for various reasons. Children “on” and “of the street” continue to languish at the fringes of society. They will continue to do so unless we wake up to the harsh reality that the phenomenon of street children does not exist only in numbers; it is evident in myriad colors of deprivation and poor physical and psychological health. Programs and strategies to address their condition are not effectively implemented due to lack of information in Jammu region.

Objective: To explore and understand the psychosocial, demographic, educational and health characteristics of street children in an urban area.

Material and Methods: 80 street children were observed and interviewed in-depth employing an open-ended questionnaire supplemented with probes wherever necessary. The participants were chosen after mapping potential sites in urban Jammu using purposive and snowball sampling.

Result: More than half (52.5%) of all children studied were females. The street children were aged between 7 and 18 years and majority of them (81.25%) were not attending school and were engaged in petty jobs. Almost all of them suffered from common morbidities such as respiratory problems, gastrointestinal problems, fever, injuries, and dental problems. Content analysis of the transcripts yielded five major themes: poverty, family disharmony, civil unrest, unplanned migration and discontinuation of schooling with number of major and minor categories.

Conclusion: The study substantiates that multiple factors are responsible for them being on street. There was an apparent lack of organised health and social services for street children in Jammu. Near absence of non-governmental organizations was noticeable.

KEY WORDS: street children, poverty, familial issues, civil unrest, migration, qualitative study

Introduction

Children are the important assets of the nation and as such an increased global awareness of the needs and rights of children has been noticed. In spite of this, the conditions in which many children live today are becoming worse.

The rapidly worsening phenomenon of “street children” is a manifestation of this neglect worldwide. Although a great deal has been written about street children, it still defies a precise definition. The phenomenon of being on street encompass a continuum, ranging from children who spend some time in the streets and sleep in a house with ill-prepared adults, to those who live entirely in the streets and have no adult supervision or care.

The term “street child,” was developed in the 1980s to describe “any girl or boy for whom the street has become his/her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected or supervised by responsible adults.”^[1] However terminology has continued to evolve and can be considered inclusive of street and working children.

The UNICEF estimates that millions of children live or work on streets worldwide and the number is constantly growing.

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India with a population of more than 1 billion has at least 11 million children living or working on the streets.^[2] The phenomenon that was restricted to metros has become quite apparent in smaller cities and towns owing to rapid urbanization and associated social changes.

The sad part is that despite huge numbers and unfavorable physical, social, and psychological conditions, the problem of street children is not a priority to the research community and the government alike. The paucity of reliable data is a hindrance for their inclusion in developmental policies. Therefore, this study was conducted with the objective of describing their psychosocial, demographic, health and educational characteristics and the reasons for them being on street. Needless to say, the information thus gained can be utilized to frame policy at local and national level.

Material and Methods

After taking the approval of Institutional Ethics Committee, this study was conducted on street children in urban Jammu for a period of 1 year extending from November 2012 to October 2013. The following children were considered eligible to participate:

- (a) Aged 7–18 years; male or female and
- (b) Inhabiting streets or spending long hours on street or
- (c) Hired by any agency or working for themselves or
- (d) Found begging.

The selection of eligible participants was done using purposive and snowball sampling.

The investigator undertook an initial mapping exercise to identify potential sites for the selection of eligible street children in urban Jammu [Figure 1]. All the children identified in these sites were listed at the initial visit. The list was continuously updated as more and more eligible children were identified as a result of snowball sampling. Verbal consent was obtained from all the children before interviewing them. Wherever possible consent of the parents/guardian was also solicited.

An appropriate place for the conduct of interview was then located on mutually convenient basis and the interview was conducted on subject's convenient time. A typical interview lasted for about 1.5 hours. The first few interviews were conducted using the semi-structured proforma which comprised predominantly of open-ended questions. Later interviews were mostly unstructured and incorporated inputs gained from the initial interviews and therefore were freely supplemented with probes. The direction and pace of interview was determined largely by response/s of a particular child. Many times keen observation led the investigator to further probe about specific issues. The investigator offered incentives to some children so as to compensate their loss in earnings or offered to reschedule the interview at some other place or time. Some street children, however, refused to oblige and were excluded from the study.

Data Analysis

Qualitative methods including content and thematic analysis were used to draw meaningful inferences and interpretations. Quantitative analytical methods were used as supplement to describe the characteristics of the sample.

Result

Table 1 depicts that majority of the children studied were “children on the street” with a higher proportion of females representing the sample. The mean age of boys and girls was 12.18 (2.62) and 11.35 (2.28) years, respectively. As far as the educational status is concerned, nearly 4/5th of the children studied were presently out of schools. These children belonged to two categories: one who never got enrolled and others who dropped out from the school. Although two and half times less females got enrolled in schools, more males dropped out. Almost half of the children (47.5%) were involved in begging activities with females outnumbering males. A higher proportion of males were involved in scavenging and other occupations. Almost all children reported some morbidity in the last 1 year or so. Nearly half of the children studied reported abuse of one or other type. Police harassment was the predominant abuse reported followed by physical violence.

Qualitative Analysis:

Content analysis revealed five main themes based on the similar experiences shared by the children. Among the themes which resonated were poverty, family disharmony, unplanned migration, civil unrest, and discontinuation of schooling. These themes provided a framework for understanding the reasons for them being on street [Table 2].

Theme 1: Poverty

Most children cited poverty and scarce opportunities for work as the major reason for being on streets. Their parents were beggars, small vendors, or unemployed and their earnings were too meagre for family survival.

Case study: Deepak (name changed) 14-year-old boy from Rajasthan, left family voluntarily to contribute to his family income. “*At times, we had nothing to eat. It was just horrible to sleep on empty stomach.* He has never been to school. “*My father didn't have enough money to feed us, how could he send us to school?*” Rag picking would fetch him Rs 100–120/day. He manages to send some money to the family.

Theme 2: Family Disharmony/Familial Issues

Some attributed their existence on streets to the dysfunction of the family system epitomized by parental separation/parental death/ long illness of parent/s. In many cases, familial separation does not last long and usually ends up in remarriage of one of the parents leading to abandonment of children who thus become “*Children of the street.*”

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of street children (*n* = 80)

Sociodemographic characteristics	Gender		Total
	Males	Females	
Category of child ^a			
Children on the street	35 (45.45 %)	42 (54.55%)	77 (96.2%)
Children of the street	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.8%)
Age in years			
7 to ≤10	12 (52.2%)	11 (47.8%)	23 (28.7%)
>10 to ≤14	19 (40.4%)	28 (59.6%)	47 (58.7%)
>14 to ≤18	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	10 (12.6%)
Street child hailed from			
Northern states ^b	19 (57.5%)	14 (42.5%)	23 (28.6%)
Western states ^c	5 (38.5%)	8 (61.5%)	13 (16.2%)
Central India ^d	4 (19.1%)	17 (80.9%)	21 (26.1%)
Eastern states ^e	2 (66.6%)	1 (33.4%)	3 (3.6%)
Myanmar	8 (80%)	2 (20%)	10 (12.5%)
Number of siblings			
≤3	17 (45.9%)	20 (54.1%)	37 (46.2%)
>3	21 (48.8%)	22 (51.2%)	43 (53.8%)
Educational status			
Enrolled	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	15 (18.7%)
Never enrolled	8 (27.6%)	21 (72.4%)	29 (36.3%)
Drop out	21 (58.3%)	15 (41.7%)	36 (45%)
Work activities			
Begging	12 (31.5%)	26 (68.5%)	38 (47.5%)
Scavenging	16 (61.5%)	10 (38.5%)	26 (32.5%)
Others ^f	10 (62.5%)	6 (37.5%)	16 (20%)
Health issues			
Respiratory problems	10 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)	17 (21.2%)
GIT problems	8 (42.1%)	11 (57.9%)	19 (23.7%)
Fever and dental issues	6 (33.3%)	12 (66.7%)	18 (22.5%)
Injuries and pain	12 (80.0%)	3 (20.0%)	15 (18.7%)
Nil	2 (18.2%)	9 (81.8%)	11 (13.9%)
Abuses faced			
Physical violence	6 (40%)	9 (60%)	15 (18.7%)
Police harassment	9 (52.9%)	8 (47.1%)	17 (21.3%)
Public harassment	0 (0%)	4 (100%)	4 (5%)
Sexual abuse	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1 (1.3%)
Nil	23 (53.5%)	20 (46.5%)	43 (53.7%)

^aOn basis of time spent on streets, place of their sleep and maintenance of family ties.

^bIncludes J& K, Delhi, Punjab, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh.

^cIncludes Rajasthan and Gujarat.

^dIncludes Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh.

^eIncludes Assam, West Bengal, and Orissa.

^fIncludes car cleaners, shoe cleaners, vendors, and tea stall worker.

Table 2: Content and thematic analysis

S#	Theme	Major categories	Minor categories
1	Poverty	Lack of resources	Hunger Non fulfilment of daily needs
		Large families	Hunger Inability of parents to meet needs Intention to contribute toward family earnings Torture/parental force
		Alcoholic parents	Torture/physical violence Contribution to family earnings
		Discontinuation of schooling	To kill time To work for family survival
2	Family disharmony/familial issues	Death of parent/s	Remarriage of parent Abandonment by parents Single parent
		Divorce of parents	Remarriage of parent Physical violence Torture by step parent Discontinuation of schooling Augment family earnings Torture by relatives
		Long illness of parent/s	Discontinuation of schooling For making earnings
3	Migration to cities	Lack of resources	Hunger Inability to meet needs
		Insecurity among parents	No opportunities for schools Lack of documents
		Parental force	To contribute toward family earnings
		Peer/sibling influence	Follow them as role models Forced by them
		Discontinuation of schooling	Enjoy time Kill time To work for family survival
4	Civil unrest	Lack of resources	Hunger Non fulfilment of needs
		Financial crisis	Abandonment by parents Hunger To contribute to earnings
		Alcoholism	Parental torture/force
5	Discontinuation of schooling	Disinterest in studies	To kill time Forced by parents To augment family income
		Bad in studies	
		Punishments in school	
		Consecutive failures	

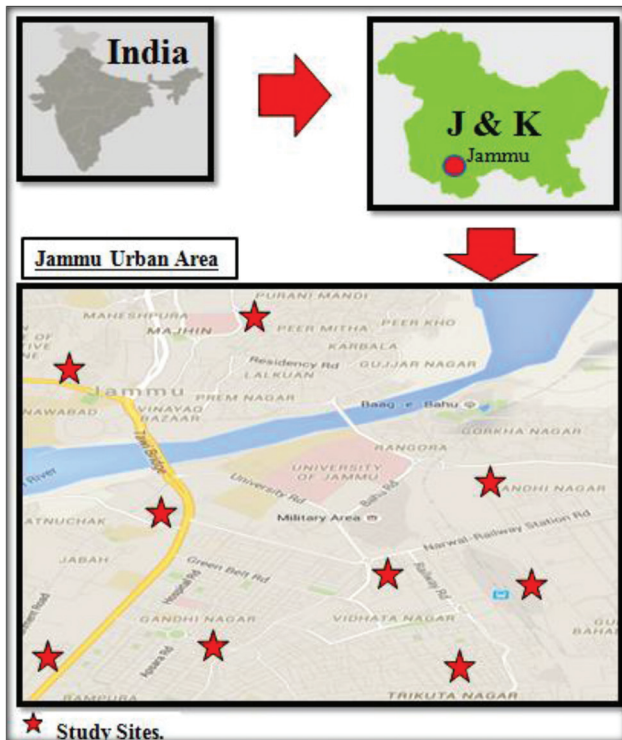


Figure 1: Study sites.

Case study: Ajay (name changed), 16-year-old boy from Bihar abuses his mother who left him and his brother after the death of his father. “*Me and my brother moved to our sister’s place in Jammu and we stayed with her family but they tortured us and we were made to do household work in return for some food. My brother-in-law sold my younger brother for some petty amount. I brought my brother back only when I started working.*”

Theme 3: Migration to Towns

A handful of children were on streets because their parents migrated to other cities in the hope of finding better livelihood.

Theme 4: Civil Unrest

There were some children who were originally inhabitants from places near international borders (Bangladesh, Myanmar). Riots/unrest at their native place forced them to leave their homes and they had to find shelter on streets.

Theme 5: Discontinuation of Schooling

Some hated to go to school. Others were disinterested in studies due to consecutive failures or for fear of punishment in schools. They would spend their time either playing or loitering on streets. Some of these children were forced by their parents to work and contribute toward family income.

Discussion

Each of the 80 street children encountered during the study was unique in oneself with a different story to tell, the relevance and implications of which have been discussed in the following paragraphs. The fact that we could only use some qualitative techniques (in-depth interviews and case studies) might have limited our understanding of the phenomenon to some extent. We would have been better informed had we been able to do focus group discussions or key informant interviews as well.

Transcription of content might have affected our interpretation of the experiences owing to difficulty in communication. It is also possible that we might have missed street children as we limited our study to urban areas only. The authors would consider it most pertinent if the conclusions and opinions expressed by the investigator are seen in the context of limitations listed above.

Characteristics of Street Children

Most children encountered during this study were “children on the street.” The work done by the UNESCO in India and by other workers testify this pattern.^[3-8] However, lower figures have been reported from other parts of the world.^[9,10] This inconsistency seems to stem partially from different definitions used to describe street children.

This study reported predominance of females over males which would perhaps change the common perception among researchers that street boys are archetype of street children in general.^[3-22]

The study reported a higher non-enrolment and dropout rates among street children. Mixed results have been reported by researchers with some reporting lower rates^[5,10-14,17,22-30] whereas other reporting higher rates.^[6,8,9] The differential rates of enrolment and drop out has much to do with available opportunities for learning and effective implementation of policy initiatives (admission formalities, school hours, and initiatives for their retention in schools).

Most children encountered during the study were working children. They were engaged in wide variety of occupation which was similar to what has been reported by other workers across nations.^[5,8-12,16,17,22,24,26-28,31,32]

Abuse was reported quite often. Children shared their experiences about abuse on their own in the natural course of interview and therefore offered valuable insight into the prevailing abuse at the hands of biological parents, step parents, and others. Harassment by police was the predominant complaint reported by street children. The abuse phenomenon is rampant and has been highlighted by other workers as well.^[8-13,24]

Reasons for Being on Street

Shared themes and subthemes meant there were multiple causal chains, although poverty was the central issue.

Poverty is known directly or indirectly to force children toward streets.^[6-12,24-28] Notwithstanding this, many researchers believe that, "Poverty is a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain this phenomenon."^[6,8-10,27] We also observed a multitude of causes, such as alcoholism, family violence, non-fulfillment of basic needs, hunger, and familial issues, in pushing the children "on the streets" and sometimes "of the street."

Sufficient literature exists to explain the phenomenon of children being pushed to streets by alcoholic parents.^[7,9,13,24-27] Lack of childhood security gets full expression in driving children "on or of the street" whenever there is any event such as divorce, death, or long illness of parents in the family.^[6,9,10,12,17,22-28] The divorce/death of the parents would leave children with one struggling parent leading to rapid de-escalation in their living standards particularly in case of remarriage of one of the parents, a situation which was commonly observed among the parents of street children in Jammu.

Interestingly, none of the children studied in Jammu turned to street for excitement/independence, a phenomenon reported by some researchers.^[6,9,10,24,26,28]

Conclusion

Although the poverty was a central issue but it was family which willingly or unwillingly pushed the child on the street. It is ironic that streets are functioning as a surrogate refuge for many of the children studied. The connection between dysfunctional family system and poor parenting needs to be studied deeply. The study substantiates the existing understanding that multiple factors are responsible for the observed phenomenon and though their relative contribution may vary, the intensity and enormity of the challenges faced by these children are the same everywhere. Near absence of non-governmental organizations and abysmal performance of social sector initiatives was a key factor.

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