Who and Where Should they turn to? The Plight of Street Children

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Abstract: *This paper was motivated by observation(s) of pathetic scenes of street children looking for food in waste bins; teenage 'street mothers" with their babies strapped onto their backs while they begged for help from motorists at intersections in the city centre. It sought to identify the push/pull factors sending children and teenagers to the street; to determine livelihood challenges faced by street children and to recommend possible solutions for winning the street children back into their families. The presence of street children is a disgrace to "our city," and gives foreign visitors a negative image of Zimbabwe. A descriptive survey was used to collect data from 30 children who have found refuge in the streets of the Central Business District of Zimbabwe's second largest city. Most of the data were collected through interviews with street children. Officials from Government offices, Non Governmental Organizations and counselors provided information through responding to questionnaires. I concluded that a lot still has to be done to address the problem of street children. It is certainly not prudent to turn a blind eye to them.*

Keywords: Street Kids; Stray Children; Rehabilitation; Socialization; Culture; Counseling and Stigmatization;

Research Problem: Street children return to the streets after rehabilitation .They lack the primary socialization and modeling framework of the family which serves to foster health, growth, good behavior and general development.

1. Introduction

Whose children are these? How come they live in the streets? Homeless people are increasing in number all the time. Streets do not give birth because they have no biological or physiological capacity to do this. Notwithstanding this, many countries face the problem of homeless young people. In Zimbabwe, the rich have become richer and the poor get poorer by the day. Numbers of street kids keep swelling, especially in urban centers. This paper attributes such phenomena to economic developments; to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and political change processes. It is common to see groups of street kids operating from specific areas of the city. Activities undertaken in their territorial "turfs," include begging, stealing and just loitering.

2. Background to Study

After thirty- two (32) years of political independence, Zimbabwe's economic development and social development are still far from the ideal. Poverty continues to rear its ugly head. Per capita income is still below what was targeted by several Economic Reform Programmes. Unemployment levels are around 70 % (CSO 2012) Economic recovery has not been effective because only negligible revitalization has taken place in the manufacturing sector. The Fast Track Land Reform Program was a welcome political decision but so far, productivity remains very low. This is particularly true of small-scale farmers who are hard hit by the dearth of inputs and requisite agrarian skills. Social progress has taken place in so far as provision of clean water, sanitation facilities and literacy rates are concerned. Unfortunately, abject poverty persists and is largely responsible for the existence of street children.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Role of Family Unit.

UNICEF (2002) cites orphan hood, abuse, overcrowded homes, abject poverty, death/divorce of parents and family dysfunction as major drivers of street children. Mc Lanaham (1994) sees the dysfunction of family units as being mainly responsible for sending children into the street.

I strongly agree with Suda (1997) who observes that the tradition an African family was characterized by a stable family and as many children as possible. Children were the glue that made husband and wife/wives stick together. It was for the sake of the children's livelihoods that unhappy marital relationships were tolerated. This is according to Boaten (2006:73). This paper is concerned with factors that have broken down the family units and subsequently given birth to street kids in Bulawayo. Witting (1997) discovered that most street children are victims of violence, sexual exploitation, neglect and chemical addiction.

3.2 Basic Human Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs places "love, self growth, autonomy, identity, responsibility, psychological health," as basics. This paper questions how the street children meet such needs. The condition of the street children, according to Freire (1986) is a "dehumanizing and dehumanized totality." They do not belong to any home; they lack basic needs such as shelter, food, clean water, clothes, blankets and health care. Living and "working," in the streets is a tall order. Street kids often fall prey to every physical, sexual and moral danger. Battles of different sorts are fought among the street kids (UNICEF 2003). In essence these children have no childhood.

3.3 Socio – Economic Factors

According to Aptekar in Boaten (2006:66) most children are on the streets because of poverty. Mufune (2000) points out that being on the street is a public disclosure of destitution. The parents of street children are generally poor, whether rural or urban. Butcher (1999) and Bourdillon and Ruvero (2003) exposed the difficult circumstances which street children find themselves in. Mobility/migration from rural to urban areas, with the hope of securing some essential resources in the urban centers is largely blamed for the continued existence of street children. The rise of street children has been linked to societal stress associated with rapid industrialization and urbanization, (Le Roux in Boaten 2006:61).The increase in the number of children implies an increase in the magnitude of livelihood challenges of street children. In Zimbabwe, street boys and girls constitute an estimated 75% and 25% proportion of the street child population (UNICEF 1993 in Lalor 1999:761).Donors, such as the Organization for Rural Association Programs (ORAP) and World Vision tried to feed school children and street children too. I point out that more lasting solutions are needed.

3.4 Offences/Risky Practices.

Street children have been reported to fight, steal and sexually abuse each other; Foster et.al (1996) shows that in Brazil, street children take drugs. Data collection exercises revealed some frightening practices among street kids. Muchini and Brundy (1999) found that street children practise pick pocketing, glue sniffing, smoking *marijuana* (dagga), gangsterism and prostitution. UNICEF (2001) showed that 77.3% of street children take intoxicants and 5.7% have unprotected sex with multiple partners. Early pregnancies are very common .Paton (1990) attributes all the deviant behavior to the depravity of these children's fundamental social needs, including food and shelter, security and a family unit.

3.5 Attitudinal Position(s) of Society towards Street Children

There has been very little, if any sympathy for street children. The public view them as ill- mannered thugs who are a nuisance. This paper found that they were indeed a neglected lot. It would be interesting to check whether or not the most recent population census included them at all? Similarly one gets keen to know if the Local Authorities ever consider street children for housing (a human right). The stipulation of article1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of June 2006 shows that there is discrimination and rejection of street children by society. However The Association for Human Psychology emphasizes the need to believe in the worth of persons and dedication to the development of human potential. (Chiremba, Makore – Rukuni, 2004).

Some Organizations like Child line, Arise and Shine and different church organizations have tried hard to rehabilitate street children. WHO (2002) defines palliative care for children as the active total care of the child's body, mind and spirit. Parad and Parad (1999) think street children need crises counseling, which involves provision of education,

guidance and psycho –social support to people facing difficult situations. Counseling theories are well known but there are challenges in applying /using them on street children. Outstanding among these are communication barriers and lack of a conducive environment(s). Comfortable and private space is needed during counseling (Sommers- Fenagan et.al: 1993:33).Maunganidze and Mupunga (2004) stress the significance of effective communication.

3.6 Original Homes of Street Children
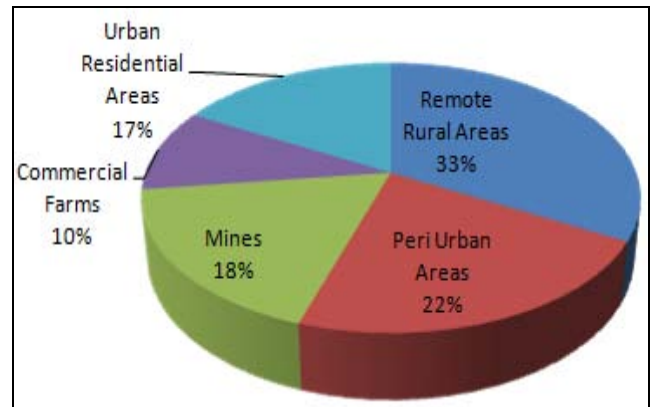
It confirmed that homelessness is a result of frustrated people who leave for the city to look for greener pastures which they do not find. The exodus from rural areas leaves a lot of people stranded on the streets. Some children are born and bred in the streets and do not know any other place.

Responses from face to face interview showed that 65% street children in the sample had never been to school. The reasons that send children to live in the streets were detailed in the table that follows.

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Orphan hood	10	33.3
Poverty	8	26.7
Abuse	6	20
Divorce by Parents	1	3.3
Family Dysfunction	3	10
Combination of factors	2	6.7
Total	**30**	**100**

3.7 Abuse Experienced By Street Children

Category	Girls	Percentage	Boys	Percentage
Sexual Abuse (Rape/Sodomy)	6	37	4	36
Physical Abuse (Assault)	5	31	3	27
Emotional Abuse	3	19	1	10
Bullying	2	13	3	27
Total	16	100%	11	100%

Chances of spreading HIV and other sexually transmitted infections were found to be very high.

4. Other High-Risk Activities
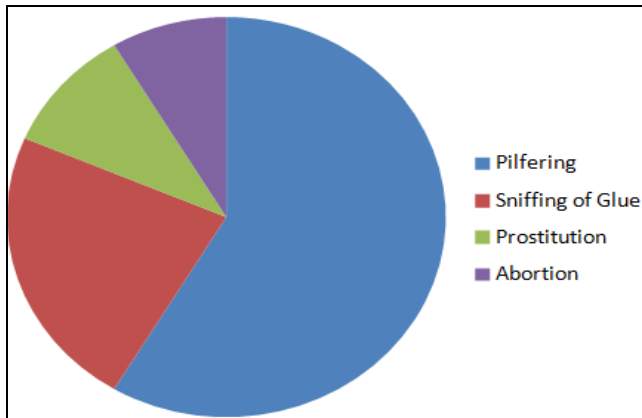
When asked about society's perceptions, the majority of street kids said society does not trust them, does not love them and others actually avoid them. Very few said they get some affection and hands-out from the public. Unfortunately most children confessed they had escaped back to the streets after rehabilitation. Reasons cited are detailed in the pie-chart below.
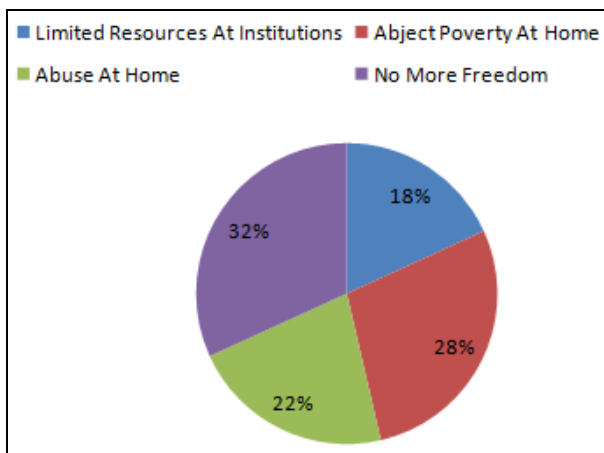
Interviews revealed that street children often seek help from individual well-wishers and charitable organizations. When asked how they came to know about these "Sources of Salvation", they cited luck, friends and outreach programs.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

Unemployment levels remain very high and most people continue to live below the poverty datum line. Poverty still prevails and most street children actually do not want to be in the streets. They have no option and all they need is a society that empathizes with them and supports them. Material resources like food, shelter and clothing in addition to crisis counseling would alleviate street children's predicament. Other possible solutions include the inputs from multi-sectoral sources. There is also need for continued education and revitalization of the family unit and community. I vehemently agree with Maphatane and Schurink(1993) who propound that street children have developed ways of looking after themselves and sometimes their families as well and so they are a "unique category of "children in need of care."

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