

FAMILY NETWORKS OF STREET CHILDREN AND SCHOOL CHILDREN OF ELDORET, KENYA

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Abstract

Objective: To study the family networks of “on” the street “of” the street, shelter and school children in Eldoret town.

Design: Cross-sectional and multiple group case-control study design.

Setting: Eldoret town and Faculty of Health Sciences, Moi University, Eldoret.

Subjects: This study was based on 400 children in Eldoret town. The “on” the street children were 87 males, 13 female, “of” the street children were 89 males, 11 females, shelter/institutionalised children were 77 males, 23 females and school children were 72 males, 28 females with a mean age of 13.34.

Results: Majority of the street-based children (“of” and “on” the street) did not go further than lower primary school and their current living conditions are based on begging and doing odd jobs in the market and streets. 46% of the “on” the street children live with one parent while 97% of the “of” the street children have lost contact with their parents.

Conclusion: The “on” the street children had a higher percentage of family sector network (53.7) than the “of” the street children (47.9%) and shelter/institutionalised children (40.1%). Generally, school children still have strong family ties.

Introduction

The phenomenon of street children in Kenya dates back to the colonial period (between 1890's and 1963). With the emergence of new towns, Nairobi, Mombasa, Eldoret, Nakuru, and Kisumu among others, street children became part of the new development. At independence, street children had increased in number and ever since have become a problem not only for the Kenya government, but also for voluntary and non-government organizations (NGOs). For instance, in 1997, the Child Welfare Society of Kenya (CWSK) estimated that there were about 625,000 children in especially difficult circumstances in the country (1). In the following year, the total number of street children in Kenya was estimated at 135,000. However, this figure might be higher since there are no census data about street children. Although Nairobi has the largest number of street children, the problems are not confined there alone. It is increasingly becoming a big issue in virtually all towns in Kenya. For example, by 1988 Mombasa had an estimated number of 5,000 street children, Kisumu 4,000, Kitale 2,000, Nakuru 2,000, Eldoret 1,000, Nyeri 450 and Thika 520 (1).

Recognising the poor living conditions and the serious threat posed by street children, 56 – Kenyan based organisations dealing with children issues formed the National Children in Need Network (NCNN), under the African Network of Prevention and Protection of Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN). The NCNN enables the concerned bodies to co-ordinate their activities all aimed at improving the living conditions of children found in difficult circumstances (for example those “on” and “of” the street children).

Despite the fact that the NCNN is in place, problems related to poverty continue to plague a considerable number of Kenyan families, and the children moving from homes onto the streets of big and small towns continue to grow. Central to this study, Eldoret town recorded its first street children in 1989, since then the town has experienced an influx of street children especially during the 1991-93 ethnic clashes that erupted mainly in the Rift Valley and parts of Nyanza and Western provinces of Kenya. In 1991, after the government was forced to introduce a multiparty system, it is thought that, the government instigated “ethnic” violence in order to punish those ethnic groups, which supported the opposition, and to reward its own supporters with illegally obtained land (2). Most of those displaced by the “ethnic” violence were subsistence farmers with little formal education. These people have been rendered virtually destitute following their displacement and loss of property. Many members of the internally displaced Kikuyu, Luo and Luhya ethnic groups have drifted to the urban slum areas. The United Nations estimates those as much as 75% of the estimated 300,000 displaced persons in the country are children (3). Thus, it should be emphasized here that the problem of children living in difficult conditions in this case street children in Kenyan towns, in particular Eldoret, is real and can no longer be underestimated.

Methods

Study Design and Subjects

We employed cross-sectional, multiple group case – control study design. The study design allowed for comparison within and between cases and control groups. We had two case study groups, “of” the street children “on” the street children and two control groups, school children and children in the shelter. Street children are not a homogenous group. Recognition of this heterogeneity in the concept of the street children is incorporated into the principal United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) definition of street children (4) . UNICEF identified three broad categories of street children. These are children “on” the street, children “of” the street, and children who have been “abandoned”.

Children “on” the street who form the majority (about two thirds in most studies) maintain strong family ties and have a sense of belonging to a household. They are on the street to earn money to contribute to the household income (5,6). In some studies, these children are contributing as much as 70% of the total family income. These children spend their time in the streets selling wood carvings, snacks paper bags and other ware to the public. Significant feature of these children is that, they usually return to the family house to sleep at night. In our study, these children were in two categories: the hawkers and beggars. Hawkers

were sent to sell items for their families/beneficiaries, thus some were like small traders. The youngest children in this group were still going to school. This group was no different from other children who assist in doing domestic work. Farm work like looking after cattle and harvesting crops. The beggars are young ragged looking children who spend the day begging, scavenging, and will steal if opportunities arise, e.g. from unlocked cars and unattended luggage, etc. These children are seen in the streets sniffing glue and smoking cigarette butts. Most of the “on” the street children come from single parents households and they have come to the street to earn money to support their families’ daily needs.

Children “of” the street are children who, for whatever reason, fully participate in street life at an economic and social level. In some cases, these children have a home too and a family available to them, but they do not go home with any degree of regularity or consistency. A large number of these children have come to Eldoret to earn money, some of them take their saving to their families once in a while. Others have no functional family ties, in some cases these children have decided to sever all ties with their families. These children beg, steal, scavenge, work in informal sector, and abuse drugs. They are completely on their own, although some may have peer (gang) support. They face stark realities of life day after day, being hemmed in by exploitative older street children and adults.

On the other hand, “School children” as a control group come from the same neighbourhood as street children. Most of the school children’s parents are employed in the informal sector. Others come from single parent households (mainly headed by women) with their mother selling farm produce in the market. In addition to school and street children, “shelter children”, as one of the control groups have no home to go to, even if they wished to do so. They are in the shelter because of the death of their parents and unavailability of appropriate extended family to take them in. Others have been rejected/abandoned by their parents. Thus, shelter children are orphans, former street children, abandoned children, and children who have been brought to the shelter by their parents because they are unable to feed and educate them.

Measurement of social networks

In this study, we used the Revised Version of the Maastricht Social Networks Analysis to measure the structural social network characteristics of the street children and the control groups (7). Social network refers to the available personal network (8). It has been used for research and for diagnostic purposes in populations such as chronic psycho-geriatric patients, alcohol and drug abuse patients, and arsonists. In the case of street children, we modified the instrument to fit the situation in Eldoret. The instrument passed through various revisions dealing with language, sequencing, topic covered and its relevance to the children. We pre-tested this instrument with school children that did not participate in the study before we agreed on the final semi-structured guide.

Analysis

We aggregated the network file into a new data file using the SPSS software in which the focal person became the unit of analysis. Thus we aggregated the size composition of the network, family sector, frequency of contact with parents and cluster (father and mother).

Results

Sample characteristics

The respondents were recruited through multiple methods including targeted snowball sampling, mapping, spot observation and focus groups. Consequently, the four groups compared in our sample totaled 400 children – the “on” the street were 87 male, 13 females; “of” the street children were 89 males, 11 females; children living in the shelter were 77 males, 23 females and school children were 72 males and 28 females. Their mean age was 13.34 years. As shown in Table 1, majority “of” the street based-children did not go beyond lower primary school and their current living situation is mainly by scavenging. Fourty six percent (46%) of the “on” the street children live with one parent while 97% “of” the street children have lost any contact with their parents. The school children still have strong family ties (see table 1 for details on the social characteristics of children).

Table 1. Social characteristics of the “on” the street, “of” the street, shelter and school children in Eldoret.

Characteristic	Group			
	“on” the street (N = 100)	“of” the street (N=100)	Shelter (N=100)	School (N=100)
Gender				
% Male	87	89	77	72
% Female	13	11	23	28
Mean age (SD)+	13.3 (2.6)	13.6 (2.3)	12.7 (3.0)	13.8 (2.5)
Highest educational level***				
% No education	21	16	-	-
% nursery/lower primary	53	71	87	10
% upper primary	24	13	13	59
% Lower Secondary	1	0	0	22
% upper secondary	1	0	0	9
Current work situation***				
% in school	0	0	100	100
% scavenging	78	98	0	0
% self employed	6	1	0	0
% at home	2	0	0	0
Current living situation***				
% with 2 pares	25	1	3	57
% with 1 parent	46	0	4	28
% with other relatives	17	1	0	12
% with others	10	1	0	1
% on street	2	97	0	0
Neighbourhood SES ***				
% city center	3	89	2	9
% slum	89	9	75	1
% outskirts	7	2	19	31
% rural	1	0	4	1
Neighbourhood SES***				
% high	0	0	0	10
% medium	2	0	21	21
% low	97	9	79	69
% stree	1	91	0	0

*** p<.001

* p<.05

+ N=393

Furthermore, the mean size of the social network of the “on” the street children was 10.92 (SD 3.46), “of” the street 11.70 (SD 3.91), shelter children 17.60 (SD 3.99)

and the school children was 16.17 (SD3.41). One way analysis indicated that these differences were significant ($F = 78.83$; $df = 3$; $p = .000$). The Scheffer test showed that this significant difference was accounted for by the relatively larger size of the network of our control groups compared to our case groups.

On the other hand, Table 2 presents the results of aggregating the network members and cross-tabulating the distributing of ego network members across network sectors by groups. In this case, we used the Pearson Chi-Squared test which showed that there were significant differences between groups and sectors ($\chi^2 = 279.4$; 6 ; $p = .000$). The “on” the street group had the largest percentage of the network in the family sector (53.7%) followed by the “of” the street group (47.9%). Our case groups therefore have a relatively larger percentage of family members in their networks compared to the control group (shelter = 40.1%; school = 42.2%).

Moreover, for the friends sector, a similar result was observed. The case groups had a relatively larger percentage of their social network members in the friends sector (“on” the street = 36.5 “of” the street = 41.5) compared to the control (shelter = 30.8; school = 30.3). For the helping sector an inverse pattern was observed. The case groups had relatively lower percentage of helpers in their networks (on street = 9.8; of street = 10.6) compared to the control group (shelter = 29.1 and school children = 27.5). In summary, the control groups seem to have a more balanced network between family, friends and helpers. While the street children groups have a noticeably lack of helpers in their social networks. This deficit in helpers in our case group seems to be compensated for by family – for the “on” the street group – and fiends – for the “of” the street group.

Table 2. Composition on the networks by size, sector and group

Group	Network size in mean	Family	Friendly relations	Social services	Total
On the street children	10.92	53.7%	36.5%	9.8%	100
Of the street children	11.71	47.9%	41.9%	10.6%	100
Shelter children	17.60	40.1%	30.8%	29.1%	100
School children	16.17	42.2%	30.3%	27.5%	100

Table 3 presents the results of the frequency of contact with the father. Based on the Pearson Chi. Square test we found that, there were significant differences between groups ($\chi^2 = 57.1$, $df = 6$, $p < .000$). The patterns of frequency of contact with the father for “of” the street children and shelter children was – daily 21.1% and 33.9%, occasional 42.3% and 31.1%, and no contact 36.5% and 33.9% respectively. Whereas the “on” the street and school children meet their fathers regularly – daily 66.7% and 77.4% occasional 16.7% and 16.7%, and no contact 16.7% and 6.0 respectively. Thus, the shelter and “of” the street children have characteristic pattern of occasional or no contact with their fathers.

Table 3. Frequency of contact with fathers in percent

Group	Daily	Occasional	No contact	Total
On the street children	66.7%	16.7%	16.7%	100
Of the street children	21.2%	42.3%	36.5%	100
Shelter children	33.9%	32.1%	33.9%	100
School children	77.4%	16.7%	6.0%	100

Table 4 presents the results of the frequency of contact with the mother. Pearson chi-squared test showed that there were significant differences between groups ($\chi^2 = 71.96$, $df = 6$, $p < .000$). The patterns of frequency of contact with the mother for “of” the street children and the shelter children were daily – 35.1% and 38.4%, occasional 37.8% and 45.2%, and no contact 27.0% and 16.4% respectively. The “on” the street and school children meet their mothers more regularly – daily 78.6% and 83.7%, occasional 14.3% and 13.0%, and no contact 7.1% and 3.3% respectively.

Table 4. Frequency of contact with mothers in percent

Group	Daily	Occasional	No contact	Total
On the street children	78.6%	14.3%	7.1%	100
Of the street children	35.1%	37.8%	27.0%	100
Shelter children	38.4%	45.2%	16.4%	100
School children	83.7%	13.0%	3.3%	100

Discussion

On the whole, the findings indicate that the control groups (shelter children and school children) seem to have a more balanced network between family, friends and helpers, while the street children groups have a noticeably lack of helpers in their social networks. However, this deficit in the helpers in our case groups (“on” the street and “of” the street children), seems to be compensated for by larger family in the case of the “on” the street children and fiends of the “of” the street children. Interactions between children in these groups are not to be characterized by egoism; short-term needs satisfaction and inability to form lasting bonds. Each child has a role to play in the group activities, including playing with fiends and begging for food. This responsibility for others, together with what has been described as the stable and fixed” modes of interaction between members of a gang (9), tends to indicate that interrelationships and network between street children do exist. At the affective and normative level as well as in terms of direct socio-economic relationships. One factor in the misunderstanding of relationships between street children is that, to an observer, these urban normads appear to be fast-moving dependent on the satisfaction of immediate needs and unable to concentrate. If this superficial observation is carried over to the possibility of forming enduring and healthy emotional attachment, then the prospect looks very negative indeed for the street children.

Therefore it is this type of consideration that has lead other writers such as Jill Swart (10) to point out that such an attitude goes along with the nature of the social supports available in the street. This apparent lack of forward planning, the inability to defer gratification to which Agnelli (11) has referred to, is in fact a survival strategy. It is not that street children to do have medium and long term plans, but they also have a sense of reality and recognize that such plans are not congruent with their present resources. Swart writing of the grouping of Malunde in Johannesburg notes that, they are often described as “pseudo – families” (10). The groups provide all the functions that sociologists expect of the family: economic support, protection, emotional and affective relationships, health care and so forth. These findings also

support the view that, adults do not exclusively moderate the form and integrity of relationships among children. Children form relationships among themselves independent of adult guidance and outside the adult norms and models available to them

Furthermore, street – based and institutionalised youth have occasional or no contact with their parents. Majority of the street children have lost ties with their fathers, those “on” the street who still have some contact with their fathers it is not on a regular basis. The “of” the street children and those in the shelter have the most critical problem because they are completely detached from their families. In particular, “of” the street children are developing without any adult guidance. These youngsters are completely depended on their peers for their daily living. The ‘on’ the street children have links with their parents especially their mothers. However, they spent over 10 hours a day hawking/begging, which does not leave much time for quality relationships with parents.

Moreover, our findings suggest that street children organize their psychosocial attributes primarily within the framework of the realities available to them and the supports existing in those realities. They tend to seek constructive adaptive patterns even though, their own lives have been marred by loss, abuse and exploitation. The street children have formed strong supportive ties and caring relationships and they cope actively with their lives on the streets rather than homes or institutional environments. Emotionally, the greatest risk to which most street children are exposed to is the loss or lack of an adequate relationship with an adult caregiver. In terms of attachment theory (12) and the developmental effects on basic emotional security, trust identification and psychological nurturance, this loss/lack has profound implications. Ironically, what is frequently reported by street children is that the loss/lack of such a relationship in their pre-street existence was an important precipitating factor in their choice or forced acceptance of street life. The example below is illustrative.

Moses Odeke is a 12 years old boy who went on the streets at age 6 after running away from the home. He has one older brother who is currently held in a juvenile institution. He has never met his parents although they live in Langas slum in Eldoret town. He mainly begs outside Sparkles (a disco hall) in Eldoret. Sometimes he begs for food from eating places in town. Odeke smokes cigarettes and sniffs glue. Besides, in the streets he has his own play mates and once in a while share whatever little food they have. At times, they are harassed by police for loitering or pick-pocketing and some end up in the juvenile institution. Odeke would like to become a mason when he grows up. He would also like to go to school, even if it means in the children’s home.

Street children typically report that their homes of origin were punitive, rejecting, hostile and lacking in adult

emotional support (13-17). Further to this, Cockburn (18) has reported on similar high levels of assault within families (40%). He has also recorded that 95% of the mothers in this sample were teenagers when their first child was born; and that alcohol abuse was almost universal in these families. These latter three factors have been commonly observed in other samples (14, 17-18) and it appears likely that the presence of these factors creates a context of high level for both abuse and the lack of an adequate caregiver relations.

Conclusion

The study looked into the structure of the family networks of street children ties and how their psychosocial needs are fulfilled. The street children have larger family network but lacked social services support compared with the control groups, which have a more balanced network between family, friends and helpers. We conclude that, the children who have a regular contact with their parents had their psychosocial needs fulfilled.

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