

INCLUDING STREET CHILDREN

A Situational Analysis of Street Children In
Durban, South Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'Including Street Children' was a collaborative project with **Street Action (UK)**, the **University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)** and **Umthombo Street Children (South Africa)**. The primary research in Durban, South Africa was funded by the UK governments **Department for International Development (DfID)**, Pretoria, South Africa.

The research was inspired by **Umthombo Street Children** in Durban¹. Umthombo is an organisation that brings policy and practice together through a strategy of empowering and changing the way that society treats and perceives street children. The full report will be jointly published by **Street Action** and the **Centre of Africa Studies** at the **School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London**.

Global Action for Children welcomes the research published by Street Action and the Centre of Africa Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. For too long street children have been left off the research and policy agenda and the result has been an appalling lack of attention paid to these highly vulnerable children. It is our sincere hope that this work will be the first of many that will help inform the global community as to how best support this marginalized group of young people.

Global Action for Children, Washington DC

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INTRODUCTION

Street children have a right to be included in research². The rationale to undertake this research came about through the recognition that very few comprehensive studies have been published on the issue over the past decade³. Research dealing with street children or youth, particularly in Africa is not common. In this report we explore the subject of street children in South Africa. The results and findings seek to start addressing policy, practice and ideas around the phenomenon and also in relation to international child protection policy. The research on the ground was carried out to provide objective data regarding the health and well-being of children living on the streets; to describe their experiences of that life; and to describe the range of services directed at them. The study intends to provide insights and per-

spectives that, even if not exhaustive, could update and better guide responses and services to these children. Examples of good practice models are rare and there remains a persisting dichotomy between our understanding of street life and the policy and practice that are promoted to tackle the issue. Much of the literature available is still entrapped in a 'pathology of case studies' that fail to provide systematic information to policy makers and practitioners⁴. This report aims to move beyond emotive narratives of street life. It begins to inform policy makers and practitioners by setting out specific recommendations that relate to the findings from the research focussing on the physical and psychosocial health of street children in Durban.



Photograph by Natalie Mollaghan

The Purpose Of The Research

Although research local to South Africa has been done in the past⁵, considerable time has elapsed and therefore it is timely to build on those foundations and to tackle the physical needs of these children such as HIV, substance abuse, and malnutrition within a sequence of care. Evidence-based research is invaluable to enable service providers, stakeholders and authorities to develop strategic approaches within multifaceted programmes. This report brings attention with rigour, objectivity and data to a subject that is rarely focussed on or responded to in the manner in which it deserves in terms of making any substantial policy change. It recognises the value in having statistics and objective data to inform the child rights sector and the public about the plight of children and young people living on the streets. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Child Protection Strategy, for example, outlines the need for data to be made more readily available on vulnerable children in an effort to protect their rights. In notable cases such as sexual exploitation, abuse, trafficking and migration, it acknowledges that data remains difficult to obtain and more must be done to fill the gaps⁶. These are all issues street children face, but analysis linking their experiences to the overall policy of protection remain weak due to the lack of theory and practice in research and case studies attributed to the issue⁷.

Street Children – The Context

How many street children there are globally and how to define what a 'street child' is have been issues of contested debate for decades. The exact number of street children is impossible to quantify, but according to a UNICEF report in 2006 it predicted numbers in the tens of millions or higher. Some estimates place the figure as high as 100 million⁸. In the past decade there have been large increases in Africa and Eastern Europe due to a whole array of intractable challenges, including HIV/AIDS and rapid urbanisation.

Today, children are living on the streets of South African cities due to a multiple of poverty and social related issues⁹. Street-life can be devastating and extremely traumatic with hunger, violence and disease ever present. Their exclusion from basic health and education services leads to greater vulnerability. What is meant by vulnerability is a disputed issue in child rights practice, but important to recognise in relation to street children and the risks they face. It is also important to substitute adults' perceptions of vulnerability for ways in which children express their own personal experiences in order to develop a true picture of street life¹⁰. Street children are at risk from sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Substance abuse, in particular solvent abuse (glue sniffing) is prevalent and used as a way to escape the harsh realities of street life. Street children get involved in petty crime to survive and many children also lose their lives.

External perceptions traditionally see children as a passive group lacking in agency, although living on the streets is a conscious decision. It is a life that many children opt for in preference to returning home or accepting services from provisional departments or non-governmental organisations (NGOs)¹¹. Theories of situated learning indicate that certain aspects of the child's experiences on the streets can be positive in terms of personal growth. Research in South Africa and internationally has also shown that children value the personal autonomy that follows their escape from situations at home that they find untenable. The pull of the streets seems incomprehensible in light of the abuse and deprivation they face, and yet many opt for the streets as a way of escaping the extreme social and economic circumstances in their communities.

HIV/AIDS has added to the complexity of the issue of street children in South Africa. Street children are particularly vulnerable to contracting the disease due to the high levels of abuse they encounter but also sexual behaviours and the education available to them related to the issues¹².

Including Street Children

The title of this report is 'Including Street Children.' It reflects the issue that many of us working with street children focus on regarding the inclusion and recognition of this vulnerable group into policy and practice. Many NGOs have sought to develop studies relating to the issue of street children that often lead to incompatible paradigms of research. According to Conticini, the fragmented body of studies has made the issue 'difficult to conceptualise on a global scale and within a holistic discourse, therefore resulting in limiting the capacity to inform policy makers and practitioners.'¹³ Merging research and practice seeks to determine the degree at which studies like this can influence evidence based policy making, which in turn move away from personal interpretation of a situation and instead present a systematic understanding of the street children and their lives.

This is an important report because it focuses on how the children described their own lives. It is not a perfect study, but the methodology adopted begins to describe the complexity of the challenges facing South Africa's street children. Through interactive workshops, the quantitative health survey and the feasibility and acceptability of HIV testing programme, the development of child participatory research methods were used to enable street children to explore specific topics. Through these approaches, data obtained from children on the streets was triangulated and learning points reinforced. It is noteworthy that the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (as amended by Act 41 of 2007), grants children the right to participate in decisions that affect them:

"Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way - and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration ."¹⁴

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) similarly advocates that children be enabled to deliver their personal insights in their own, preferred ways.

Too many policies and interventions fail to take into account children's own views and therefore fail to address the holistic context in which, in the case of this report, street children live and experience their vulnerability.

Putting Street Children On The Child Rights Agenda

Child rights have come to form an explicit aspect of the human rights agenda, outlining why children should be protected from political, economic and social hazards. With increasing numbers of children facing neglect, discrimination and abuse, the debate on child rights has gained prominence in the last few years. In 2009 the CRC celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Since its adoption in 1989, the CRC has been ratified more quickly and by more governments (all except Somalia and the USA) than any other human rights instrument¹⁵. It remains a benchmark for international guidelines and legislation that rely heavily on its principles. These are also reflected in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (AC) and both documents require countries to monitor their progress in relation to child protection and the service delivery to vulnerable children.

As is often the case, street children remain excluded from policy priorities. The report is published at a time when global attention is focussed on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Unless governments, NGOs and policy makers put the right to care and protection of children alongside the right to survival, health and education, millions of children's lives will be put at risk¹⁶.

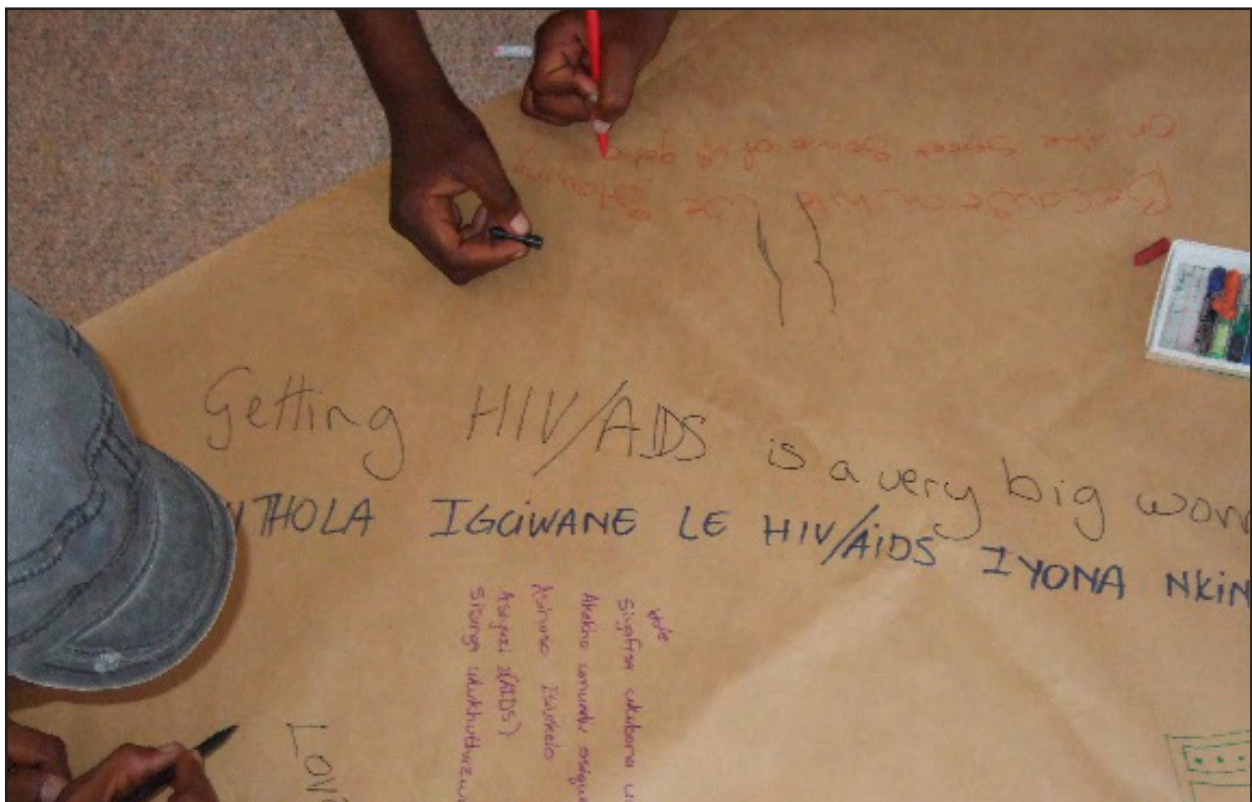
The report focuses on the need to evaluate both national and international policies and interventions that secure children's rights to ensure the well-being and social protection of street

children. The term ‘social protection’ is a relatively new concept in the child rights sector¹⁷. Recent studies and publications have sought to provide a conceptual framework, demonstrating the ‘linkages between social protection and children’s welfare’¹⁸. The case made for the social protection of street children is reflected in Article 20 of the CRC that states:

“A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interest cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the States.”¹⁹

The rights-based approach enshrined in social protection policies places clear obligations on states to fulfil that role. This report shows

through the published results of the grassroots research how street children are deprived of this protection and right. This report also looks at the context of street children in South Africa aligned with the introduction of the new Children’s Act and policies being developed by the Department of Social Development on street and working children. The Children’s Act of 2010 brought South African child care in line with international law and gives effect to the rights of children as enshrined in the 1994 constitution. These include children’s right to social services; right to family care; parental or alternative care; right to be protected from abuse, neglect and mistreatment and right to have best interests paramount. A question is asked as to whether street children form part of that mandate and whether the lack of data collected has meant they remain a footnote for government priorities.



Photograph by Joe Walker, Street Action

Giving Street Children A Voice

Street children are one of the most misunderstood and misaddressed populations in the world of interventions to reduce child poverty²⁰. Given the very sensitive nature of this research, such work represented many ethical, methodological and legal challenges. The research team consulted widely with Umthombo Street Children and others representing different constituencies to consider whether this work should be attempted and if so, how to best do it without causing harm or creating risk to individuals. The

project required careful planning and consideration of ethical and legal issues. The protocol was approved by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban, South Africa. Prior to any public dissemination of the results, the analysis of the data and a summary of the findings were fed back to the street children who participated in the workshops and, where possible, to the children who participated in the survey. This was undertaken at a special event organised by Umthombo Street Children and Street Action in 2009 prior to the research being written up.



Photograph by Natalie Mollaghan

Looking Forward: Key Recommendations and Actions

The conclusions outlined in this report bring together objective data from a methodology of child-centred participatory research. It goes beyond the usual narrative of street life to present an inter-disciplinary understanding of the processes of street children's experiences on the streets. The specific recommendations below seek to present an argument for policy change at national and international level. This will lead to a significant improvement in our understanding of, and service delivery to improve, the physical and psychosocial health of street children in Durban and beyond.

Street children are still living on the street and urgently need to be seen as a critical child protection issue by government and NGOs. Their coping strategies are oriented towards changing their lives in order to move away from the street environment²¹. It is imperative that the evidence of these strategies is supported by high quality evidence-based knowledge; leveraged resources towards developing further research; data collection and analysis of street children's experiences to ensure that creative and effective services are developed to support the children. This study also presents analysis of the practical implications for practitioners and policy makers. The report calls for child protection legislation to recognise the rights of street children with the introduction of targeted policies and guidelines that would be required to deliver more effective change. This will require the full engagement of donors, governments, child rights organisations, child and health service providers and legal personnel that understand and can support the implementation of the jurisprudence of the legislation.

In order to place street children on the agenda, all stakeholders including government, United Nations entities, the donor community (most notably DFID, European Union and USAID), NGOs and practitioners should actively focus on

the following:

- 1. Investment in research:** The dearth of credible quantitative and qualitative research on street children must be reversed so this vulnerable group is included in research and therefore vital policy and budgetary provisions. The child rights sector and donor community must recognise and actively support the correction of the lack of knowledge basis surrounding street children. This includes their reasons for coming to the street, the level and effectiveness of engagement and interventions by government, civil society and NGOs and the development of appropriate re-integration strategies that are rights-based.
- 2. Strengthening capacity, knowledge and partnerships:** National governments, regional and local governments, UN entities and NGOs must invest resources into building a base of expertise and high quality evidence-based knowledge. This is important to unlock resources towards developing further research, data collection and analysis of street children's experiences to inform child protection policies and leverage financial support.
- 3. Care, protection and rights of street children:** National governments, UN entities, NGOs and service providers must ensure the continuity of a package of basic rights to services such as health, education, nutrition, HIV/AIDS initiatives, sexual health and psychosocial support for street children. These should be aligned with national governments' child protection systems and the international rights based framework, supported by UN entities (UNICEF) and NGOs to include street children's rights to survival, development and protection.
- 4. Including street children in a post-MDG framework:** Street children must be recognised as a socially excluded group

in the call to integrate child protection and care in a post-MDG framework. This must include recognition and investment from national governments and the donor community to ensure that street children are part of the agenda.

5. Access to healthcare: Provision and access to health care and services should be attainable to the highest standard for street children as recommended by the CRC and AC²². This should include health information and the provision of empathetic psychosocial support to reduce the risk of disease and to support emotional well-being.

6. Review of existing services: Further research must review existing services for children living on the street such as shelters, drop-in-centres, institutional care and reunification programmes. This report shows that these services, though well meaning, fail the children they set out to protect and care for. It is important to evaluate present responses and imperative to involve young people themselves in this process so they can inform service providers what could be done better to meet their needs.

7. HIV/AIDS: Guidelines and tools around HIV/AIDS education (transmission, prevention and testing), children's capacity to consent, and appropriate counseling provision that are designed specifically for children on the streets and their circumstances need to be made available to practitioners.

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