



## Impact of Abuse and Neglect Among the Homeless Children

### KEYWORDS

Homeless Children, Domestic Violence, Abuse and Neglect, Stakeholders and Non-Government Agencies.

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**ABSTRACT** Homelessness and street life have extremely detrimental effects on children. Their unstable lifestyles, lack of medical care and inadequate living conditions increase young people's susceptibility to chronic illnesses such as respiratory or ear infections, gastrointestinal disorders, and sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Homeless children are lack security, protection, and hop, and continue to face a deep-rooted negative stigma about homelessness. The objectives of the present study were to find out the sexual behaviours and sources and types of abuse faced by homeless children. The present study was conducted in Tiruchirappalli District of Tamilnadu. The sample size for this research study is 300 homeless children. They were selected through convenient sampling method. More than half the participants have had knowledge about the types of abuse and gained this information from NGO's and social workers. The psychological responses to abuse such as anxiety, denial, self hypnosis, disassociation and self mutilation are common. The researcher observed from his study that the children working on the street portrayed the police as an enemy, a fearful figure and one of the most frightening street experiences. The researcher suggests that all children have the right to live in safety and dignity in a protective and nurturing environment, both at home and in the community. This is possible by creating awareness of their rights, especially their right to protection against abuse, putting in place laws to punish those who abuse and exploit homeless children and taking appropriate action to strengthen accountability on the part of government and non-government agencies and the civil society.

### INTRODUCTION

In India, more than half of homeless children live and sleep under the open sky, while the rest spend most part of the day on the street, but sleep under a roof or some kind of a covered shelter at night—perhaps a ramshackle hut, under a tarpaulin sheet, or the home or workplace of their employer. This makes 'shelter' the most acute problem of homeless children (Pagare, 2004). They make their living through rag-picking, working as helpers in small tea shops or other vending shops, shoe-shining, drug-peddling, begging, pick-pocketing, working as porters, rickshaw-pulling, etc. Most of these children live for quite a long period on the streets, though not in one place. The nature of their work is temporary, which makes mobility easier for them (Dubowitz and Bennett, 2007). These children are deprived of basic human needs of health and nutrition, shelter, education, training or recreation. In unhygienic, dirty, and filthy surroundings their living conditions are appalling (Karol Reganick, 1997). The working conditions of the children who are working under employers (on roadside stalls) are worse due to the exploitation that they face from the employers. The employers make these children work for long hours at lower wages without any social security (Johnson, 2001). The return on their work is not sufficient to even meet their basic needs.

Homeless children are victims of physical and sexual abuse by their families (the ones who have them), the police, the municipal authorities, the local goons, the employers and also the peers (Kerfoot et al., 2007). NGOs working in different cities with homeless children have pointed out that a substantial category of homeless children in Delhi are those who have run away from their homes due to broken families and physical abuse by one or both the parents. When they come to the streets, the story of physical abuse continues for them; the abuse by the family is replaced by abuse from goons, police, and employers (Powers et al.,

2004). The local goons also physically and sexually abuse these children. Often the street goons are those who have themselves grown up on the streets and earlier have been victims of similar exploitations. Having grown up on the streets, they are well aware of the various activities and nexuses that exist on the streets. Once they assume the leadership of a group of homeless children, they force them into illegal activities for money and, if a child refuses to oblige, they beat him brutally. Moreover, they use these children for sexual gratification. Both boys and girls on the streets are victims of sexual abuse; however, the problem is more acute and regular for street girls (Tyler and Cauce, 2002). Therefore the purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the characteristics of homeless children working on the street as well as the associated risk for and consequences of abuse.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To find out the sexual behaviours among the homeless children.
- To analyse the sources and types of abuse faced by homeless children.
- To understand their reaction to being subjected to abuse and coping method of coping with various types of abuse.

### METHODS AND METARIALS

The present study was conducted in Tiruchirappalli District of Tamilnadu. The universe is floating in nature. The universe is not definite, so that the researchers applied non-probability sampling method. For the present study the researcher selected the sample of 300 homeless children, they were selected through convenient sampling method. The researchers used mixed methodology both qualitative and quantitative techniques for collecting data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table No: 1

Distribution of the respondents according to sexual behaviours

Sexual behaviours	No. of Respondents (n=300)	Percentage
Anal intercourse	37	12.3
Vaginal intercourse	23	7.7
Self masturbation	83	27.7
Mutual masturbation	120	40
Oral sex	37	12.3

The Table No 1 indicates that sexual coercion needs to be viewed in the broader context of street life. According to the quantitative data gathered in this study mutual masturbation (40 percent) which is usually a boy-to-boy activity was the most commonly reported sexual behaviour followed by self masturbation (27.7 percent), anal intercourse (12.3 percent) and oral sex (12.3 percent). Few (7.7 percent) practiced solely vaginal intercourse. In analyzing the extent of seemingly same results argues that many of the homeless children who have run away from home have done so because broken family and they were beaten by parents or guardian. Tragically, their homelessness can lead to further abuse through exploitative child labour and prostitution. Not only does abuse rob runaway children of their material security, but it also leaves them emotionally scarred. Many of the abused children are traumatized and some refuse to speak for months after being rehomed. To aggravate matters, children often feel guilty and blame themselves for their mistreatment. Such damage can take years to recover from in even the most loving of environments; on the streets it may never heal (Bura, 2005 and Reddy, 2007).

The recent investigation confirms the findings of the study by Segal and Ashtekar, (2013), he observed that younger boys perceive that the older boys must be getting pleasure (maja) from "forcing" them, and they are eager to experience this maja. They are Sexual coercion on the street is an exercise of power, a way to maintain status and subdue a subordinate. Boys who have been forced, in turn want to be in positions of command. Just as sex may express power, it may also be interpreted as an expression of affection and protection. Boys who are "forced" may feel they will receive protection from hazards of street life. The nature of street life—including the lack of food, shelter, protection and emotional support combined with strong power structures—sustains sexually coercive behaviours. The researcher suggests the facts that safeguarding the homeless children from distress and abuse by providing safe places to sleep, healthy recreation options, safe ways to save money and opportunities to build relationships with caring adults. In addition to this there is a need to provide proper life-skills training, counselling and health education to help homeless children adopt safer sex behaviours.

The Table No 2 portray that the most common sources of abuse types. The main source of verbal abuse was children working on the street who also sniffed thinners and glue (90 percent). Almost all children subjected to verbal abuse indicated that customers (40 percent) were the next main source of abuse followed by the police/constabulary/security personnel (35 percent), tradesmen (20 percent), gangs (20 percent) and other working children (15 percent). In this study, the rate at which physical abuse occurred was

similar to verbal abuse. Children working on the street who also sniffed thinners and glue (65 percent) were the most common source of physical abuse followed by other working children (55 percent) and police/constabulary/security personnel (25 percent). In relation to sexual abuse, children working on the street themselves were the most common source of sexual abuse followed by children working on the street who also sniffed thinners and glue (26.6 percent) and school friends (19.4 percent). A study by Audu et al., (2009) found that a majority of girls working on the streets had been exposed to sexual assault. They were significantly more likely to be sexually assaulted when they had no formal education and worked for more than eight hours per day. Many studies have reported on children's reasons for working on the streets, how socioeconomic factors contribute to children working on the streets and the various types of abuse that occur. However, few studies have examined the consequences for the children working on the streets of the physical, emotional and sexual abuse they experienced (Kurt, et al., 2009 and Hadi, 2010).

The researcher suggest the facts that identifying the various types of abuse and offering strategies to at-risk children to help them cope with the hazards of their lives on the streets is of critical importance in helping to establish a healthier and safer society. Social workers can play a very important role in this regard by identifying the health care needs of children living and working on the streets, who are at most risk for abuse and neglect. Social workers are in a position to increase awareness of the various types of abuse and the consequences of abuse and can also offer support and solutions for solving or dealing with these problems.

The Table No 3 shows that the reactions of the children when faced with the three types of abuse. The feeling of shame was higher among children facing verbal and physical abuse compared with those subjected to sexual abuse (3.5 percent). This is not a surprising finding considering verbal and physical abuse usually occur in front of other people. Children subjected to verbal (65 percent) and physical (60 percent) abuse felt fearful of the person who abused them compared to 15.3 percent exposed to sexual abuse. Of children who were subjected to verbal and sexual abuse, 10.0 percent and 34.3 percent respectively, stated they felt nothing at the end of abuse. In this study, the children subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse (15.0, 20.0 and 15.3 percent respectively) expressed they wanted to beat, swear at or murder the perpetrators.

The Table No 4 demonstrated that the coping methods used to deal with the abuse by homeless children. 'Responding with same methods' was the most common coping strategy used among children for all abuse types. 'Doing nothing' was a common coping method, particularly for children subjected to verbal and physical abuse (30 percent and 25 percent respectively). Twenty-five percent, 26.6 percent and 15.0 percent children working on the street in the study sample stated they prefer 'fighting' when faced with any kind of abuse. This method is followed by the coping method of 'help of family members or relatives' (15.0 percent, 30.0 percent, 19.4 percent respectively); or 'running away' (35.0 percent, 20.0 percent, 11.2 percent respectively). Other coping methods in this study such as, 'using cutting and explosive weapons' (15.0 percent, 5.0 percent and 11.2 percent respectively) were used less often. Reporting the abuse to police and the formation of gangs were additional coping methods. The researcher observed the majority of the working children

on the street carried implements, tools or objects such as sharp items, knives and pieces of glass to protect them from abuse.

The children were asked whether they had any knowledge about the various types of abuse and coping methods. More than half the participants (60.0 percent) had knowledge about the types of abuse; 73.6 percent gained this information from their families and relatives while 23.5 percent received information from teachers and social workers. A small percentage (2.9 percent) stated they had heard about abuse from other children working on the street. Almost all the children (90.0 percent) showed interest in obtaining information about abuse and how to protect themselves while on the street. An interesting finding in this study was that 10.0 percent of the children were not willing to accept any information about abuse. When asked why, they said they did not need to know about it. The researcher concluded from the survey that today's children will become the adults of the future and will take on the responsibilities and functions of society. Since the serious issues of child abuse and violence against children negatively affect their psychosocial state and overall development. There is a need for programmes and other measures should be implemented to protect children against abuse and violence in their lives. The research studies explored those children working long hours on the streets are exposed to many hazards including sexual, emotional and physical abuse. They also face a high risk of injury or even death. Some are even forced into child prostitution or other criminal activities (Stanhope and Lancaster, 2003 and Kacker, et al., 2007). The study of Hadi (2010) found that children were physically abused, financially exploited, forced to involve in inappropriate activities and forced to work for long hours. Parker (2008) indicated children exposed to street culture frequently faced violence, various risks and problems from the police.

The researcher observed from his study that the children working on the street portrayed the police as an enemy, a fearful figure and one of the most frightening street experiences. The homeless children stated they were yelled or shouted at with the perpetrators using rude, hostile behaviour and swear words along with belittlement and humiliation toward the victims. Some of the children stated they were also abused physically and attacked with sharp instruments, as well as being kicked and hit. It was also found the most common sources of verbal and physical abuse were from other children living or working on the street who were also users of thinner and glue sniffing, customers, police and gangs, respectively. Another important finding of this study is both female and male children said older people openly propositioned them for sexual intercourse. The psychological responses to abuse such as anxiety, denial, self-hypnosis, disassociation and self-mutilation are common. Coping strategies may include being angry with the perpetrator or acting as a passive victim, rescuer, daredevil or conformist. The children exposed to any of the abuse types may develop mental health disorders. These findings were in line with the study of Ribeiro, (2008). A study by Ahmadkhaniha et al., (2007) found that children had been sexually abused and children diagnosed with depression were more likely to have been sexually abused than children who were not depressed. Although children working on the streets contribute some money to the family budget, they stated their families despised them. Children exposed to the various types of abuse were affected negatively physiologically, psychologically and socially. Social isolation and feelings of loneliness may

result from traumatic childhood experiences such as sexual abuse or other psychosocial factors that lead to feeling estranged or misunderstood by others (Rew, 2007).

## CONCLUSIONS

Children working on the street are one of the groups who are at most risk for developing a variety of physical, emotional and psychological problems. Their numbers are increasing not only in India but in other countries of the world as well. Children working on the street need information and training to develop their skills and awareness about abuse. In India homeless children working on the street are not educated or informed about usual health education courses and abuses. Not only do children need to be educated about the topics of violence and abuse, social workers should also be educated about children working on the street, their problems, child abuse and violence so they can provide the most effective and beneficial means of help. In addition, social workers are in a unique position to play a key role in screening, assessing and treating all types of abuse in children. The harsh conditions under which these children live and work are a breeding ground for abuse and neglect as well as a host of physical, psychological and emotional problems. Children have the right to be protected against the many risks they face so they may grow up to be healthy and functional members of society.

## SUGGESTIONS

In order to enhance the standards of care and build a protective environment for homeless children in the country, there is a need to develop standard protocols on child protection mechanisms at the district, block and village levels, defining roles and responsibilities of each individual and agency.

A child who has been abused or continues to be in an abusive situation, needs a variety of services, including professional help in the form of trauma counseling, medical treatment, police intervention and legal support. Such a system should be established under the scheme on child protection.

Annually, large numbers of homeless children go missing and there is little attempt to track them or trace them. Such children are most vulnerable to all forms of abuse and exploitation. Not only should they be tracked but existing mechanisms for their rescue, rehabilitation, repatriation and reintegration should be reviewed and strengthened while keeping in view the best interests of the child.

Child protection is a shared responsibility and for any intervention to be effective there should be a synergy between efforts being made by different stakeholders to address the issues. There is a need to create a mechanism that will make such a synergy possible. These may include child protection mechanisms at village, block, district and state levels which involve parents, elected representatives of urban and rural local bodies, teachers, anganwadi workers, medical practitioners, police and social workers and responsible members of public among others.

Government, NGOs and civil society should make efforts to instill non-sexist norms and values through advocacy and communication strategies and campaigns using electronic, print and folk media and through open discourses on gender equity with involvement of public figures. Focus should be on elimination of discrimination and abuse of girls and on creating awareness of existing legislations.

The biggest challenges in child protection are the creation of a database of all child protection services, linking of lateral services, creation of a knowledge base, and tracking of missing children, all of which have to be addressed at the grassroots level. The Child Protection Data Management System should be developed at the district level itself with upward and lateral linkages.

All children have the right to live in safety and dignity in a protective and nurturing environment, both at home and in the community. This is possible by creating awareness of their rights, especially their right to protection, in parents and other stakeholders, putting in place laws to punish those who abuse and exploit children and taking appropriate action to strengthen accountability on the part of government and non-government agencies and the civil society.

**Table 2: Distribution of the respondents according to Source of abuse types**

Source of abuse	Types of abuse					
	Verbal *		Physical *		Sexual *	
	n=150	%	n=150	%	n=195	%
Other children working on the street	23	15.0	83	55.0	75	38.4
Children living or working on the street who sniffed thinners and glue	135	90.0	98	65.0	52	26.6
Tradesman	30	20.0	-	-	-	-
Customers	60	40.0	-	-	-	-
Police/constabulary/security personnel	52	35.0	38	25.0	-	-
School friends	-	-	-	-	38	19.4
Gangs	30	20.0	-	-	-	-
Others (taxi driver, boss, older man/woman/pimp)	15	10.0	8	5.0	51	26.1

\*Participants gave more than one answer

**Table 3: Distribution of the respondents according to their reaction to being subjected to abuse**

Reaction	Type of abuse					
	Verbal *		Physical *		Sexual *	
	n=150	%	n=150	%	n=195	%
Sadness	23	15.0	-	-	7	3.5
Fear	98	65.0	90	60.0	30	15.3
Feelings of shame	128	85.0	60	40.0	7	3.5
Willing to beat/swear at/murder	23	15.0	30	20.0	30	15.3
Feeling nothing	15	10.0	-	-	67	34.3
Others (anger, hesitation)	-	-	-	-	49	25.0

\*Participants gave more than one answer

**Table 4: Distribution of the respondents according to their coping method of coping with various types of abuse**

Reaction	Type of abuse					
	Verbal*		Physical*		Sexual*	
	n=150	%	n=150	%	n=195	%
Doing nothing	45	30.0	38	25.0	6	3.0
Fighting	38	25.0	23	15.0	52	26.6
Help of family member or relative	23	15.0	45	30.0	38	19.4
Run away	53	35.0	30	20.0	22	11.2
Respond using same methods	45	30.0	83	55.0	52	26.6
Use of cutting and explosive weapons	23	15.0	8	5.0	22	11.2
Others (reporting abuse to police, forming gang)	-	-	-	-	14	7.1

\*Participants gave more than one answer

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