



# Determinants of Recidivism in Street Children - Findings from Thuthuka Rehabilitation Centre Bulawayo Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the determinants of recidivism street children after rehabilitation. The research adopted descriptive case study design and used in-depth interviews to collect data on the determinants of recidivism on street children. A total of six street children aged between 5 to 17 years and three social workers were selected for this study using purposive sampling. Data analysed using thematic results indicated that the lack of primary socialisation to street children makes them feel inferior when trying to fit back to the society. Family members or guardians are not ready to welcome them. A common feature among all the participants was that they were coming from unstable home environments, which they are later reintegrated to the same environment that caused them to shun away from home. The study recommends that the future researchers should explore the psychosocial effects of living on the streets.

**Keywords:** Recidivism; Street children; Rehabilitation; Reunification

## Introduction

It is estimated that a child runs away from home or care facility every five minutes in the United Kingdom and research shows that this can happen to anyone, with children running away from affluent homes as well as low-income households [1]. Most children often have the idea that leaving home and beginning a new life on the streets may be better off compared to living in the current settings as they may view them as challenging or unbearable. These children end up living and sleeping on the streets as they have no other source of shelter, nor adult to supervise and care for them, as well as, no form of income to sustain them. Due to their virtue of living on the street, they are called street children and according to UNICEF [2], this can be any boy or girl for whom the street in the wildest sense of the word has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by

responsible adults.

In a study carried out in Bloemfontein, South Africa, Friberg and Martinsson, they observed that nowadays childhood is no longer a universal social construction; it depends on the experiences a child gets in the society. The streetwise experience of making ends meet, causes children to adopt preconceived adult roles as they try to make ends meet. Giddens [3] writes that, children who are exposed to emotional and physical violence at home do not have the luxury of a caretaking family, instead, the life of a street child is a life of constantly trying to survive on the street. In other words, these street children become active participants in the construction of their life.

In other words, such children develop self-reliance whilst they have not reached the legal age of majority thus still being considered as minors. The problem of street

children is present in Zimbabwean cities, especially in the Central Business Districts. In South Africa, the living situation of street children is filled with difficulties and often related with drug abuse, violence, crime, family disruption, abandonment, disease, prostitution, and so forth [4]. Poverty is the major push factor that drives children away from home. With the country experiencing economic challenges, high rate of unemployment, HIV/ AIDS pandemic, lack of opportunity for social mobility and strained families [5], these and other challenges have left the majority of the population vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity and high increase in the number of orphans and vulnerable children. This desperate situation has increased the number of street children according to World fit for Children (2005-2009). UNICEF files [6] reveal that poverty is rife and it is children who suffer most.

Chinyangara et al. [7] states that continual physical abuse and emotional neglect contribute to street children going to the streets to work, beg and steal and in most cases, parents struggling to survive themselves often have little interest in the fate of their children. The abandoned and neglected children form street gang to protect one another and as a relief to their loneliness. It is this, then, that pushes children into the streets as what was meant to be an oasis of peace has become an instrument of misery and pain. Chinyangara et al. [7] asserts that these children are subjected to abuse and exploitation as the street is full of all sorts of predators, they do not have family care and protection with most street children aged between 5 and 17.

The problem of street children working and living on the streets is now a growing problem in most African cities and towns according to Barker [8]. The problem requires urgent attention as it threatens the very fabric of society. The starting point would be to get an understanding of who these children are and the factors that turn them into the street and why they keep going back to the streets even after they have been reunified with their respective families.

Numbers of street children are hard to access as they tend to increase everyday: An unpublished survey made by the Zimbabwe Department of Social Welfare towards the end of the year 2000 estimated that there were around 5,000 children on the streets of Harare alone, including children who worked regularly on the streets but who had a home to go to at night. The numbers have been increasing with growing unemployment and poverty. At the end of 2002, Streets Ahead an organization focusing on children living on the streets in Harare, had around 1,500 children on its books these children who at some stage sought or accepted the organization's assistance. It is these alarming numbers that has inspired this study to desire to explore the causes of recidivism of street children after rehabilitation.

Currently, major sources of texts on children in Africa are inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations which mean that data is collected within the framework of programmes rather than theory [9]. This alone can be pointing that they might be a larger number than that which is being reported. Since our source of information is program based it means that children who do not qualify for a program are excluded.

Street children are seen to lack the primary socialization and modelling framework of the family that is thought to foster healthy growth and development. In their everyday lives, street children operate within a kind of family system which embodies other groups on the street, including ex-street children, stall owners and elder street children. They therefore encounter an abundance of social spaces and experiences. Recidivism has been characterized in programmes that have not considered the children's rights, personal needs and freedom of choice in the provision of services and those that have addressed the symptoms rather than the causal factors. Some organizations working with street children alluded that it is difficult to run programmes for street children since they are manifestations of profound social illnesses that do not respond to quick and easy solutions. Recidivism of street children has also characterized programmes that address street children singularly without looking at the wider contents of family and community. However, over the years, episodic removal of children from the streets while achieving some success has proved to be a temporary solution. Some former street children return to the street and are initiated further into street life as the factors that continue to drive them onto the street remain unaddressed.

Individuals and organizations like Simukai, Streets Ahead and Thuthuka work with street children, and rehabilitate and reintegrate some of them with their families of origin and communities. However, there have been occurrences of rehabilitated street children relapsing and going back to the streets [10].

It is against this background that the researcher seeks to find the determinants of recidivism on street children, in response to reunified children going back to the streets and those who have been rehabilitated remaining in the streets.

## Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To identify the causes why children run away from home.
2. To assess the current challenges faced by street children on the streets
3. To explore the determinations of recidivism faced by street children after reunification.

## Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm. A qualitative research allows collection of data based on the experiences and observations of the research participants. Consequently, Cooper et al. concluded that qualitative research is precise and uses rich descriptions and depicts reality in a way which makes it an unusual and unexpected source of insight and a mirror whose reflection makes the unknown perceptible in the known. The exploratory research design was adopted as it allowed the researchers to investigate the determinants of recidivism likely to be faced by street children and probably the society at large, basing on past and present experiences [11].

## Population, Sample and Sampling Strategy

A total of six street children and three social workers participated in this study. These were boys who had run away from home due to various reasons aged between the ages of 5 and 17. Participants were identified using the purposive sampling technique. This was effective as it allowed the researchers to focus particularly on children who ran away from home after rehabilitation as they would allow the exploration of details that would lead to the results and findings of the research.

## Data collection Instruments

The study adopted in-depth interviews to collect information about the determinants of recidivism of street children after reunification. In-depth were used as they give detailed first-hand information from the respondents based on their experiences from home through to the streets.

## Procedure

The researchers obtained a research letter from Midlands Zimbabwe University Department of Psychology and took the letter to Ministry of Social Welfare. The researcher also informed the children about the purpose of the research and enlightened them on the research and they could choose whether to proceed with the study or not. The researcher assured the children that whatever information they will give will be strictly confidential. In addition, where explanation was required in the event of failure to interpret the questions, further clarification was done. Permission to take notes and record audios during interviews was granted, as the latter would be used as backup [12,14].

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method for identifying,

analysing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organizes and describes data in rich detail.

## Results and Discussions

The results of this study show that street children are not well reintegrated into the society hence they go back to the street soon after reunification.

### What causes street children to run away from home?

Poverty proved to be the most prevalent factor that led street children to the streets. Some respondents pointed to poverty as the major factor but amongst them some attributed to divorce of parents as the cause for them to go and live on the streets [15]. UNICEF files (2001) reveal that poverty is rife and it is children who suffer most.

Death of parents or guardians was another reason why they run away from home. Some respondents pointed out that they run away from home because their parents passed away and they had no one to take care of them. Some respondents pointed out that after the death of their parents, their relatives chased them away from their homes hence they turned to live on the streets.

Child abuse was also seen as a major contribution. Some respondents noted that they went to live on the streets because of physical abuse at home especially by respective guardians. One respondent alluded that 'I was a punching bag of my uncle, he will beat me for no reason or the fact that I was not his biological son. He saw me as a burden that my father left him with. I ran away because I was tired of the beatings'. Two respondents alluded that their uncle would sexually abuse them and they feared him so much to report him hence they left home to live on the streets. Chinyangara, et al. [7] states that continual physical abuse and emotional neglect contribute to street children going to the streets to work, beg and steal.

### What motivates them to stay in the streets after rehabilitation?

The study revealed they enjoy the peaceful street life compared to the oppression they were obtaining in their homes which makes the street a place of choice for them regardless, of the dangers, labelling that accompanies the life of street children. One respondent alluded that the "street is so peaceful; I do not have to live in fear of being shouted at for no apparent reason or being beaten. I am happy."

The study also revealed that addiction to drugs such as glue, marijuana, broncho and other illicit drugs traps them to

remain in the streets. One respondent stated that he wishes to go back home but he is now a drug addict to such an extent that even after reunification, he finds himself in the streets within a few days after reintegration. The reason being that at home there is no such freedom of taking these illicit drugs and they are not readily available as compared to the streets.

The study revealed that in the streets there is quick and easy access to cash which makes them to assume that everything is ok in the streets. They can beg and get enough money to buy food, at times better food than that they can get at home. One respondent alluded that street food is varied, delicious and they are assured of three meals on a good day, unlike at home where getting a meal a day is a miracle. However, things have changed due to the covid-19 pandemic as it has become increasingly difficult to get handouts, food as well as minute jobs to earn them quick cash. Regulations on movement being restricted to those offering essential services has spelt doom for the street children as it meant a drastic decline on their ability to survive on the streets.

It was also revealed in the study that they fear going back home because of the abuse which drove them into the streets in the first place. Two respondents registered their willingness to go back home but they could not stand the previous abuses they were subjected to prior to them finding a haven in the streets. The other respondent had reservations due to his delinquent behaviour which kept him at loggerheads with his guardians.

### **Are families of origin ready to accept the children from rehabilitation?**

Information from Social Workers reveals that most street children are willing to stay at home because the streets are now dangerous for them and they think their safer at home. A number of non-governmental organisations have inspired street children to be responsible and better people. However, for them to achieve the desired results the push and pull factors that led to the children leaving their homes need to be addressed in order to curb relapse.

The study revealed that the amount of pain the child caused the family before they left for the streets determine whether the child would be accepted back or not. The role of Social Workers is to prepare the family to forgive and accept the child, in other words the social worker plays reconciliatory role. Social Workers revealed that in some cases they have dealt with families who are still grieving and fighting the stigma of having a child labelled street kid thereby making it difficult for reunification. In cases where the child was involved in delinquent behaviours such as fighting, stealing, rape it was very difficult for the family to accept the child because there is no evidence that the child has changed. Based on

the above, some families are unwilling to take the child back because of the pain and stress they went through in the past.

There are complex issues where the child might have committed incest, or the child might have been living with a step parent or guardian, in such cases the child going back to the streets becomes a blessing in disguise for that family. The reintegration of such a child becomes a challenge. It is also said that at times the departure of the child into the streets after reunification makes the family to realise their mistake and cause the family to look for the child in such cases when the child is to be reintegrated, the family gladly accept or receive the child.

### **Conclusion**

The study concluded that labelling is the major factor that hinders smooth reintegration of street children into their families and the society. Some respondents alluded that their families or guardians continued to label them as street children or at times called them gangsters, hence they resorted back to the streets. Some respondents reported that their families are not ready to accept them due to the misdemeanour which caused them to leave home for the streets in the first place. It is therefore paramount that parents and guardians be educated that they are the pillars of reintegration in the children's lives. Poverty is one of the reasons that contribute to the challenges that make reintegration an uphill task. For street children, they prefer to live at the mercy of a stranger than to die with hunger under a roof. The study has also unearthed that the cause of recidivism is two way that is both the society and the child they are not ready to live in harmony. The society has created a label that follows the child wherever one goes and the new life that the child has become accustomed as a result of living in lawless streets makes it difficult for the child to live under authority. However, it must be noted that all hope is not lost as there are some street children who regret their decision as they say experience is best teacher. On the other hand some families and communities are willing to take their own children back.

### **Recommendations**

For effective reunification the researcher recommends that there is need for strong safety nets in the society that serves to assist children. This can be through starting feeding schemes for orphans and vulnerable children in the community this can be spearheaded by the government and well wishes. A case in point is the contributions of a soccer player in England by the name Marcus Rashford.

The researcher also recommends that for smooth integration to take place there is need for continuous

engagement between the society and Social Workers. This helps in that the society is empowered to work with delinquency and also enlighten the society that the problem they face with children is a world-wide phenomenon and home is the best place to correct the problems of delinquency.

The researchers also recommend the revival of Ubuntu in our societies as they say it takes a village to raise a child. The children who end up in streets will not go to the streets in the first place if the fabric that holds the society together is still intact. No child will go into the streets because they lost a parent.

The issue of street children is a national issue hence we recommend that the government fund the construction of institutions where street children can be reintegrated into. This helps those street children who have become social misfits and who do not have families to go to.

Due to the widespread of covid-19 pandemic, with Zimbabwe and Sub-Saharan Africa being a hotspot, there is a dire need to put reintegration as key if the street children are to be spared. Thus a more reason to consider finding out how covid-19 may have promoted or affected reunification of street children. This creates a gap for the department of Social Services to intervene and provide a speedy reintegration process or at least provide temporary shelter in order to curb the spread of covid-19 among street children.

There is need for the government to channel more resources to the department of Social Services for the department to be efficient and effective in the reintegrating process.

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