

STREET CHILDREN OVERVIEW

Wherever you go in the world, there are children who are homeless and live in the streets. I was surprised, in a visit to Toronto, to find that Canada has fewer gangs proportionately than the U.S. but many more runaways...young people on the streets. But it was in Kenya I had most contact with those called "the parking boys" because many of them hang out in the streets and offer to watch your car or wash it while you are shopping. They also beg along the streets, at bus stops; young girls of 10-13 years of age with "borrowed" babies, as if they were their own, which in most cases they aren't.

Few children would choose to live on the streets if offered food and clothing, security, and above all support and care from loving parents. The truth is that many of these kids are throw-aways who have been abandoned or asked to leave. Many in the U.S. and Canada have been physically or sexually abused. In other parts of the world they have been pushed out of impoverished homes. Some women living in poverty send their young daughters out to prostitute, and some of these end up going it on their own. Many street kids do have a home to which they could return.

Seasoned street children admit they are attracted to the excitement of the streets, and they often have a deep, familial attachment to their particular group. Usually these groups are led by an older, more experienced and wiser, if not caring, individual. He takes a maternal and paternal interest in the younger ones. In fact, there is little fighting and viciousness among street kids; you more often see a great deal of care and sharing among them.

Tourists and do-gooders have a difficult time passing up the request of an earnest, hungry child. Is it a good thing to help a street kid? The general advice from experts is that it is not a good thing. Handouts tend to strengthen this subculture and to attract many more. In and around any city are families and children in poverty, clinging to very fragile means of survival. Girls and boys from these homes often commute to the streets in order to bring home some small money. Any source of income or goods will attract them. It is more than a matter of urban blight and municipal embarrassment; the street culture is not healthy for individuals caught up in it or for the city in the long run.

When a teenager steps off a bus or a train in almost any city of the world, he or she comes under the immediate, watchful eye of seasoned recruiters to street life. The forces such runaways meet are largely unnoticed by tourists and most local residents. In a few minutes that child or teenager will be approached, and soon invited into a "caring" relationship and protection of one who is probably a pimp. Within 72 hours it can be assumed that most runaways or new street kids are into either drugs, crime, or sex, and usually more than one of these. These

three factors, with begging, rummaging dumpsters for food, and petty jobs, become the basis of their lives.

It is best to hear from these children before talking more about them. Here is Jerry (age 10) interviewed and translated from Zulu by Jill Swart (1990:64):

When I was eight my father was killed in the street outside the house in the unrest. The people from the house where we rented told my mother she must leave. So she took me and my sister and we slept in an old car in the field. She had a job in town but she was sick a lot. She had pains in the chest and would cough. One day she took my sister to stay with a relative in Pretoria. I don't know where. Sometimes when she was too sick to work she would send me into town to beg so we could buy food and medicine.

In town I met some of the *malunde* (street children) and we became friends. One day my mother was very, very sick and I asked another man to call the ambulance. I was too scared of *tsotsis* (thugs) to sleep alone in the car, so I went and slept with my friends in town. About a month later in town I met the man who called the ambulance and he said my mother had died. So I stayed here in town.

The same author describes Moses (10, translated from the Sotho). After his father died he began to receive by those with whom they stayed (Swart, 1990:65):

At home they beat me all the time and my mother can't stop them. So she said I must come to town and stay with my aunt. But my aunt was not here. Then I went to sleep on a bench at the station. I didn't want to go home again because of the beatings. Then some boys said I can stay with them on the streets.

And what is life like on the streets? Besides escaping the immediate problems that sent them here, kids find food and more control over their lives.

Every street child strives to find a *pozzie* (a safe place to sleep). *Pozzies* may be in derelict buildings, under bridges and escalators, in storm-water drains, rubbish bins and cardboard boxes, in parks, vacant lots, driveways and abandoned cars, on pavements and in alleys or boiler rooms. Each place has its dangers.

'When you sleep in the dustbins you don't put the lid on top. Ha! Ha! Ha! Sometimes the man is taking you away with the rubbish!' (Michael, age 14)

The children use flattened cardboard boxes both for warmth and camouflage. Many have been badly burned by the braziers, which they construct from large tins or plastic mild bottle crates and around which they sleep on cold winter nights. They commonly sleep in groups for safety and warmth.

In summer, or even on a warm day in winter, the bulk of the children's clothing is exchanged for glue, cigarettes or a small sum of money. A sudden cold spell, therefore, leaves them unprovided for. They have no place to store their clothing so they wear it all simultaneously. When they do their laundry some use one of the self-service laundromats...while others rely on the taps at parks and service stations. (Swart, 1990:69)

The conclusion of Swart's study of South African street children (in the Hillbrow suburb of Johannesburg) is a fitting close to this article:

Not every street child wants intervention in his life, but the level of voluntary attendance at projects in Hillbrow seems to indicate that a great many do. Although to a casual observer, the street child may seem to be drifting about aimlessly on the streets, the children themselves have a more positive view of their lives. Given the opportunity, children are likely to enter stable employment situations.

The *malunde* (based on interview and their drawings) want to become taxi drivers, photographers, clerks, electricians, builders, doctors, lawyers, bishops and sign-writers. One wants to be a policeman. They plan to be people of worth in the community and to raise children who will not have to live on the streets.

Employers of former street children have made unsolicited commendations of their honesty and integrity. A number of children place by STREET-WISE at community schools have exhibited a stronger sense of morality than their peers from 'normal' home settings.

For me, street children are tremendously exciting people. They question everything and by so doing, they force us to re-examine our notions about family and society, welfare institutions, education and human rights. But most of all they force us to reflect on our notions of childhood. [Swart (1990:126)]

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What do you see as the meaning of the last sentence of the above?
2. What most impressed you with this article? Do you see it as a fair introduction to street children? How would you change it, and what would you add?
3. If you were spending a month in a large city and daily met some cute street kids who seemed very hungry and begging for food—as you passed by one day in a hurry—would you give them money?
4. What is your strategy for dealing with this issue?

IMPLICATIONS

1. The urban street children (even in some rural towns) of this world represent the suffering of the innocent and most vulnerable. They symbolize the problems of a changing world.
2. If these children are a symptom of our world's pathologies, we must deal with them, the symptom, but we must attend even more to the social problems that send our children out into the streets.

Dean Borgman cCYS
