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Street Children
as reported by *Childline India &*
Government of India

Learn More

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The issue of street children is considered to be an urban problem. Children can be found in railway stations, near temples and durgahs, in markets, under bridges, near bus depots and stops, etc. Hence the definition of street is not in the literal sense, but refers to those children without a stable home or shelter. There are three major categories of street children:

1. Children who live on the street with their families and often work on the street. There may be children from migrated families, or temporarily migrated and are likely to go back to their homes.
2. Children who live on the street by themselves or in groups and have remote access or contact with their families in the villages. Some children travel to the cities for the day or periods of time to work and then return to their villages.
3. Children who have no ties to their families such as orphans, refugees and runaways.

According to UNICEF street children fall under two categories: On the street and Off the street. "Children of the street" are homeless children who live and sleep on the streets in urban areas. They are on their own and do not have any parental supervision or care though some do live with other homeless adults. "Children on the street" earn a livelihood from street such as street urchins and beggars. They return home at night and have contact with their families. The distinction is an important one because

children of the street lack emotional and psychological support of a family.

It is the second and third category of children who are most vulnerable as they are easy victims of abuse, and inhuman treatment. They are often engaged in petty theft or prostitution for economic survival. Children runaway from their homes for a variety of reasons. Some may have faced traumatic experiences in their homes. Their parents may be abusive or have problems with alcoholism, poverty and unemployment. Some children leave home drawn by the glamour of the big cities.

Street children vary across cities and regions. But a majority of these children are boys. It is also important to note girl street children are often not found in visible spaces and hence hard to trace. Age wise 40% of the street children are between 11-15 years while another 33% are between 6-10 years age group. A study found that majority (89.8%) of children live on the street with their parents/family.

There are a number of factors that lead children to living on the street. One root cause that has been identified is poverty. But poverty alone does not result in this problem. Other factors to be taken into consideration is the expansion and growth of cities, over-population, family disintegration, inadequacy of formal school institutions leading to large numbers of dropouts and failures, inability of institutions to deal with these problems, etc.

Street children mostly live in open air spaces. There are few to no shelters available in the cities for homeless children. Some may live

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in a temporary constructed hut or the house of their employer. Majority of street children work. Almost 50% of street children are self-employed as rag-pickers, hawkers, and shoeshine boys, while others work in shops and establishments. Their work hours range between 10-13 hours a day. These children are exposed to high health hazards as population and unhygienic conditions of living. Having no shelter they are constantly exposed to environmental conditions of heat, cold and rain.

Many street children also face harassment by municipal authorities and police. One - third of street children complain of persecution by such authorities. Street children also face abuse from their family members, employers and other people. The right to play of a street child is almost nonexistent as they do not have access to recreational facilities and often venture into activities available to them on the street such as drug abuse, gambling, drinking, etc.

In 2003, UNICEF estimated that there were at least a 100 million street children in the world, but though this figure is commonly found it is not seen to be based on any actual studies or surveys. In 1994, UNICEF estimated that there were 11 million street children in India. This number is said to be a drastic under-estimation. The Indian embassy estimated 314,700 street children in cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Kanpur, Bangalore and Hyderabad and around 100,000 street children in Delhi.

In 2007 MWCD report on child abuse, the study found 65.9% of the street children lived

with their families. Out of these children, 51.84% slept on the side-walks, 17.48% slept in shelters and 30.67% slept in other locations such as under flyovers and bridges, railway platforms, bus stops, parks, market places, etc. 66.8% of children reported being physically abused by family members and others. To download the full report please visit the Abuse and Violence section.

Because of a lack of permanent shelter and the fact that the number of street children is not recorded in any national survey or study street children are often called the 'hidden children'. Being hidden, they are at a higher risk to being abuse, exploited and neglected. Another group that is at risk of ending up on the street are migrant children. Children come to cities in hope of finding new jobs and opportunities for their families. Unfortunately increasing populations in the cities, children that come to the cities face meagre incomes, poor housing and usually end up on the street. The Indian embassy estimated 314,700 street children in cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Kanpur, Bangalore and Hyderabad and around 100,000 street children in Delhi.

In order to provide services to this vulnerable group of children the Government of India began the Integrated Programme for Street Children.

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