Children in the Streets:
Latin America's Lost Generation

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This study presents an overview of the situation of street children and youth in urban Latin America. Findings from numerous studies throughout the region, including original studies by the authors, are synthesized. The authors suggest that economic factors underlie the marginalization of vast numbers of Latin American children. The result is the exclusion of many of the region's children from meaningful participation in society and its institutions.

The presence of vast numbers of children in the streets in unsupervised and unprotected situations reflects an unprecedented social problem of profound deprivation and inequality. The use of the streets as a dwelling or as a work place denotes a state of acute misery for millions of children and youth worldwide. The phenomenon, although hardly unknown to the industrial economies, is predominantly found in the Third World and is most evident in Latin America where the number of street children runs into the millions (Hoge, 1983; Larmer, 1988; Lusk, 1992).

Given its scope and gravity, the problem of street children is complex and difficult to analyze or resolve. Nonetheless, we are now at a time when considerable background research has been conducted on the problem and the opportunity for creative solutions is imminent. This paper reflects a brief synthesis of the research on street children and seeks to provide the foundation for the next generation of policy aimed at resolving this global issue.

During the past decade, social science research on street children has accelerated, particularly in Latin America where street kids have been evi-

dent for decades in virtually all of the region's major cities. Several general findings about street youth can be derived from this research.

Residence

Among the most important generalizations that can be made about street youth is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, most so-called street kids do not actually reside on the street full time (Fall, 1986; Felsman, 1984; Judge, 1987; Lusk, 1989, 1992; Valverde & Lusk, 1989). About one-tenth of the total of the hundreds of children interviewed by the authors in Rio de Janeiro, Santos, Recife, Belem, and Sao Paulo, Brazil as well as in Juarez, Mexico; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; Bogota, Colombia; La Paz, Bolivia; Managua, Nicaragua; San Salvador, El Salvador; Kingston, Jamaica; Georgetown, Guyana; Cochabamba, Bolivia; and, Lima, Peru are full time residents of the street environment. The vast majority maintain some form of regular contact with their family of origin and sleep at "home" at least on an occasional basis. The Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE) has estimated that fewer than one thousand children a night may actually sleep out on the streets of Rio de Janeiro on a given night (Larmer, 1992), but the number of children to be found there during the days is in the many thousands. The availability of vacant buildings and shelters has mitigated the need to sleep in doorways or on sidewalks, yet because the typical street child's family of origin resides in the slums of the urban periphery, commuting to and from the urban center requires that they reside on the streets for at least some portion of their work week.

Street Work

A second crucial finding is that the vast majority of street youth find themselves there due to economic factors and nearly all are engaged in some form of economic activity. In Mexico (Lusk, Peralta & Vest, 1989), Colombia (Felsman, 1984; Pineda et al., 1978), Costa Rica (Valverde & Lusk, 1988), Brazil (Judge, 1987; Lusk, 1992; Rizzini et al., 1992) and generally throughout the region (Lusk, 1989), street kids consistently report that they are in street settings as a way of making money to support themselves or to contribute to their household.

Overwhelmingly, the group's family of origin lives in extreme poverty. Children from such homes engage in street work (legal or illegal) to supplement family income. Many report that they remit their earnings to the home and are proud of making a contribution (Knaul, 1991). Although poverty alone cannot account for the presence of all street children, many note that they feel a pressure to contribute to family income. Others say that they could not afford uniforms or any of the materials necessary for school attendance without outside earnings. More yet, have abandoned school altogether as a

luxury that is out of reach. Unlike street children in industrial nations who tend to leave home and reside or work in street settings to escape dysfunctional families, Latin American street kids define themselves as "workers." Note that, in contrast, about three quarters of United States street children are there to escape physical battery, neglect, sexual abuse or other manifestations of a seriously dysfunctional family (cf. Reppond, 1983; Rothman, 1991). While some North American street youth cite economic factors for their situation, most identify their family of origin as highly troubled.

When asked about reasons for leaving home, almost no Latin American children speak of adventure or the desire for freedom. The greater proportion, in fact, maintain contact with their family and are not "runaways" as this is traditionally understood. In a small minority of cases, the family of origin simply has disintegrated in the face of poverty or the child was orphaned or "abandoned." But, by and large, Latin American street kids are workers who are in regular contact with adult parents or guardians.

In a classic study of the "hard core" street urchin gamines of Bogota, Colombia who do not retain any family contact, Pineda et al. (1978) found that the most important reasons for moving into the street economy were: 1) poverty (38%), 2) family disintegration (27%), 3) abuse or neglect (20%), and 4) desire for adventure or freedom (10%). One Colombian boy summed it up when asked why he left home in Bogota, "a lot of stick and a little food" (Gutierrez, 1984, p. 218).

Gender and Age

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Latin American street children are boys. The presence of street girls has been pegged at between ten and thirty percent of all street children—a number that may reach as high as 30 million worldwide (Fernandez, 1985; Lusk, 1989; Mansilla, 1989; Minayo, 1992; Piotrow, 1992). Much less visible in surveys of street children, girls are often more evident at night working as prostitutes or working with street gangs.

Street girls are more likely than boys to be found working in conjunction with a street family--that is to say a conjugal group that resides in the streets or parks on a full or part-time basis (Lusk, 1992). In one study of street girls, it was estimated that five percent were abandoned, twenty percent were full time street girls with no family contact, and the remaining 75% were on the street with family support (Piotrow, 1992). Depending upon their individual circumstances, they are exposed to the risks of violence, hunger, police harassment and abuse, drugs, sexual abuse, pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases.

Interviews by the authors with poor families in the favelas (hillside slums) of Rio de Janeiro and the slums of Juarez, Mexico reveal that parents make every effort to retain the girl in the home environment. Girls in such settings are part of the household production strategy insofar as they act as

child care providers while the mother is employed as a service worker away from home. They may also work as house maids, laundresses, contribute labor in a household cottage industry such as sewing, or work for a maquiladora or equivalent employer (Lusk et al., 1989).

In contrast, in the U.S., runaway and homeless youth are about evenly divided between the genders. Interestingly, more American girls than boys leave home of their own free will as a "coping strategy" while boys are more likely to be "pushed out" of the home (Roberts, 1987; Rothman, 1991, p. 20).

The authors have observed children of all ages in street settings and have interviewed teenage women who have given birth to children on the sidewalk. Surveys in the region found the average age of street youth to be fourteen in Rio de Janeiro (1992), twelve in Juarez, Mexico (Lusk et al., 1989), and nine years of age in San Jose, Costa Rica (Valverde & Lusk, 1988). Distributions are largest in the 10-14 year old age group.

Family Structure

Recognizing that most street children retain contact with their family, it would be important to identify family structure, yet few regional generalizations can be made because the data differ so much from country to country. In Brazil, approximately 50% of street children come from homes with two parent families (although not necessarily with their biological father), 34% from female-headed single parent families, 10% from disintegrated families, and the remainder live with guardians or other youths (Goncalves, 1979; Oliveira, 1989; Rizzini, 1986). In San Jose, Costa Rica, it was found that only 22% came from two parent families, 38% came from female-headed single parent families, and the remainder lived in a variety of situations. These include living with brothers (7%), living with friends (5%), and living alone (16%) (Valverde & Lusk, 1989). In Quito, Ecuador, 62% live with two parents, 26% with a single parent and only 3% live on the street full time (UNICEF, 1985). Felsman's influential study (1981) of street children in Cali, Colombia revealed that 75% did not have their biological father at home. In Bogota, Colombia, Tellez (1976) determined that 53% came from single parent families, 39% were from two parent families and 15% from disintegrated families.

Most Latin American street children come from single parent families. If one breaks down the group into children who reside on the street and those who live at home and work on the streets, the group that lives at home is much more likely to come from an intact nuclear family (Rizzineti et al., 1992). Children who reside on the streets also report that the quality of home life in their family of origin was lacking in affection and stability and that the street community was an comparatively preferable alternative (Rizzini et al., 1992). Interviews with street children by the authors throughout Latin Amer-

ica reveal that, irrespective of family structure, street children as a group view their families as economically vulnerable. They perceive that they must work. In an extensive study of Cali, Colombia street children, Aptekar (1988) found that the most common reason cited for being in the environment was financial. Seemingly more important than the structure of the family is its economic marginality.

Life on the Streets

Although most street children wander in that environment to work out of economic necessity, they are exposed to a setting that has none of the safety or security of a conventional work place. Children consistently point to the level of violence as a major concern. Ironically, it is not violence from other youth or from adult criminals that they are most afraid of, but rather brutality from the police; those presumed to be responsible for their safety are their major antagonists. Indeed, life for youth in general is far from safe in many of the region's cities. Brazilian police statistics indicate that at least 6,000 children have been murdered in that country during the past four years (Larmer, 1992). Child welfare workers in Brazil believe that this figure underestimates the true extent of child homicide. Recent studies of violence against children in the region also have raised the issue of the murder of street children who have been specifically targeted by death squads and vigilantes. Street children have become targets for assassination in Rio de Janeiro in recent years (IBASE, 1989) and their murder rate has tripled in the past year (Brooke, 1993).

In addition to risking their lives on the street, children are working in an environment of street culture. This environment is difficult to imagine; it is one without privacy, comfort, nurturance, or supervision. Within it one encounters prostitutes, drug dealers, professional thieves—a "school" that socializes the children in counterproductive ways.

Surprisingly, street children are often tenacious and positive. Both Felsman (1981) and Aptekar (1988) have commented on the remarkable resiliency of the children. Aptekar (1988) has noted predictable negative effects on intellectual and emotional maturity and adjustment. Dubrow (1992) has observed that street youth demonstrate hostility, suspicion, low self-esteem and feelings of rage. Yet, it is surprising that such effects have not been shown to be profound. Lusk (1992) has commented on the entrepreneurial energy of street children and noted that their aspirations for the future are only somewhat more muted than for their counterparts in conventional family settings.

Street kids can be found in virtually every sort of economic endeavor: singing on buses in Bogota, acting as tour guides in Rio, "guarding" parked cars in Sao Paulo, transporting or selling cocaine in Cochabamba, vending

newspapers in San Salvador, shining shoes in Guatemala City, begging in
Brasilia, or selling sex in Mexico City. The list of services or wares provided
is limited only by the imagination of these survivalist children. Their "full
time work" often exceeds 40 hours a week.

By virtue of its technical illegality under national child labor laws, the
work of children is unprotected, unregulated and subject to punishment by
police harassment, incarceration and confiscation of property. Thus, ironi-
cally, even children engaged in ostensibly legal work such as sales are
subject to harassment under child labor laws. Many resort to illegal work as
well and report that they have been involved to some degree in petty theft,
burglary, drug courier work, or prostitution (Rizzini & Rizzini, 1991; Lusk
1992).

The link of street children to crime is strong in the public's perception and
in media portrayals of street youth. Despite the fact that most street children
are primarily engaged in work that is ostensibly legal, the Latin American
press and public do not perceive street children in a favorable light. In Brazil,
Colombia and Bolivia in particular, street youth are viewed as predators.
Crime waves involving youth in Rio have spread to the city's famous beaches
and have provoked widespread fear and anger among the middle classes
(Larmer, 1992). The association of street children and crime has formed part
of the rationalization for the "street cleaning" by death squads that has
resulted in thousands of child assassinations during recent years (CEAP,
1989; IBASE, 1989). It is also a rationalization for brutality by law enforce-
ment.

Despite the risks of arrest, harassment by the police, or even graver dan-
gers from vigilantes, children report that they feel compelled to participate
in the labor force because of the pressing economic needs of their families.
In Brazil, for example, working street children account for fully 30% of total
household income (Mansilla, 1989; Rizzini & Rizzini, 1991).

Policies and Programs

Any effort to remediate the living conditions and welfare of so many chil-
dren must take cognizance of the heterogeneity of street children and the
serious economic marginalization of their families. Approaches yet devel-
oped do not fully account for the complexity of the problem.

There are presently four basic approaches to addressing street children in
Latin America: the correctional model, the rehabilitative approach, outreach
strategies, and prevention (cf. Lusk, 1989). Each strategy is based on differ-
ent assumptions about the group.

The correctional strategy was the first approach to the "problem" of street
youth who were seen as a public nuisance and a risk to security. This view is

that the population consists of boys and girls who have "gone astray" and that street children require more supervision and structure, and must be deterred from a life of crime through juvenile justice programs. Up until very recently, this perception has dominated thinking about street kids and as a result, thousands of them are locked up in prisons and other similar establishments (Cavalcante, 1985; Saraiva, 1984). Often the conditions of such institutions are unsafe, unsanitary, violent and abusive (Brooke, 1993; Queiroz, 1984).

A second approach stresses recovering the children from their fate by involving them in rehabilitative programs. This perspective, a result of the influence of clergy and social workers on policy, takes the view that street children have been damaged by the circumstances of their lives and humane programs that stress drug detoxification, education and the provision of a safe family-like environment will prepare them for a meaningful future. Hundreds of such programs, usually funded by church or voluntary associations, can be identified around the region. While this perspective can account for turning many hardened street youth into productive citizens, it would be most difficult to mount a rehabilitative approach on the regional scale necessary to treat millions of marginalized street workers. As most social workers in the region observe, rehabilitation fails to get to the heart of the problem.

An innovative alternative is finding growing support in the region—the outreach strategy. It is based on Paulo Freire's model of education that emphasizes meeting students on their own turf and providing them with a combination of practical and political skills (Freire, 1973). Resulting programs utilize educadores da rua, or street teachers, who work the city providing outreach education on sidewalks and in parks (Cheniaux, 1988). Often funded by the non-governmental and church groups, many such programs stress participation in support groups that may provide some of the sustenance found in families.

Finally, the preventive approach recognizes that at the heart of the street children phenomenon are fundamental economic problems and human rights issues in Latin American society which defy simple policy solutions. During the "lost decade" of the 1980s, poverty in Latin America actually increased and its effects were felt disproportionately by the region's youth (World Bank, 1990). At present, fully 44% of Latin Americans live below the United Nations poverty line (Lowenthal, 1993). As a result of these figures, many who work in the area of child welfare are calling for new social development initiatives on the family which stress the household as the basic unit of economic analysis against which development should be measured and at which projects should be targeted (Lusk, 1993). Preventive approaches articulated by UNICEF (1985) emphasize that an understanding of the issue of street children is not to be found in the children themselves, but in the larger social

and economic forces which shape their destiny. The expressions of the pre-
ventive approach range widely based the ideological inclinations of various
constituent groups. UNICEF, for example, stresses community-based pro-
grams that economically and politically empower and employ the poor
through self-help initiatives (UNICEF, 1986). UNICEF also disseminates
crucial information to policy makers about the underlying causes of the
street youth problem such as high unemployment, rapid rural to urban migra-
tion, and inadequate housing, so that more structurally-oriented policy
solutions can be developed.

On a broader scale, non-governmental groups and coalitions of street
children themselves have mobilized for fundamental reform in the arena of
children's rights. Brazil, for example, has held two national level conferences
of street children at which calls were made for an end to violence and harass-
ment, the right to education, reform of the juvenile justice system, better
living conditions, and a claim to full citizenship. Public awareness of the
rights of working and street children culminated in the attendance of the Bra-
zilian president at the World Summit for Children in New York (Rizzini et
al., 1992).

Conclusion

Street children have been perambulating in the cities of Latin America for
generations. Now, only after the number of such children has grown expo-
nentially into the millions, do we have a solid foundation of social science
research on which to formulate future policy. The challenge is clear, yet the
solutions are not. What is clear is that no one single approach will address
the needs of the entire group. While a correctional strategy may be useful for
a small fraction of the group that has adopted a predatory lifestyle, a rehabil-
itative approach may be useful for others to be reintegrated into society. But,
for most, the labor of street children is a source of income that is not other-
wise available to their families. Until the economic opportunities to families
in the region correspond with their needs, many more thousands of children
will needlessly join the ranks of street children.

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