

Towards a Conceptualisation of Street-Children: The Case from Sudan and Ireland

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This article evaluates and analyses the experience of so-called street-children in Ireland and Sudan. It first outlines a categorisation of street-children based on differing degrees of street-life involvement. Historical evidence is then presented on the emergence of street children in Sudan and Ireland, and this is followed by comparing and contrasting Sudanese and Irish street children with respect to background, social-demographic characteristics and processes of street-life involvement. It concludes that for developing a conceptual model of street children, what is needed is an understanding of how certain behaviour patterns which might appear pathological can, in fact, have adaptive and rational properties.

Introduction

There are an estimated 100 million street-children in the world to-day.¹ Street-children are not a new phenomenon, but it is their dramatic proliferation in some regions of the world that has given their plight a visibility that is difficult for both the general population and governments to ignore. This

visibility has not necessarily helped the cause of street-children. Regarded individually as deviant or delinquent by those responsible for social control, street-children in large numbers have come to be perceived as a social threat. The opening sentence of a 1988 document on street-children by the Ministry of Social Welfare in Sudan notes: 'Vagrancy of children has become one of the dangerous phenomena forming a real threat to the entity of the Sudanese community and threatening its stability.' While this statement precedes a call for rehabilitative measures, perceptions of street-children as a 'social threat' are also evident in the policies of governments seeking to lessen this threat in more insidious ways. In Brazil for example, a 1989 Amnesty International report claimed that at least one street-child a day was killed by death squads² and Brazilian groups working with street-children have claimed that more than 4,600 children have been killed there to date.³

A basic tenet of this article is that the way in which we define a social problem is a major factor in determining the policies and programmes which are designed to address the problem. For this reason, there is some justification for pausing to examine the popular conceptualisations of street-children and make explicit the assumptions underpinning such definitions. Legal conceptualisations of street-children have historical roots, whereas popular conceptualisations are a product of the particular society in which street-children have evolved. In the course of this article, I wish to do three things: firstly, to examine current thinking and definitions of street-children; secondly, to use this as a framework for examining the conditions of street-children with particular reference to Sudan; thirdly, to bring the concept closer to home by applying it to the Irish context, by reference to Traveller children whose lives contain some similarities to those of street-children in Sudan. The comparison with Traveller children, while excluding homeless and runaway youth from the settled Irish population, may appear unbalanced: however, it is consciously drawn, as I believe that the traditional comparison between Third World street-children and First World runaways is inappropriate, if not fundamentally wrong. First World runaways and homeless youths are generally in their mid to late teens when they first experience street life, usually in reaction to unbearable conditions in their normal lives, and their behaviour violates the norms of their communities and cultures. This is dissimilar to the lives of both street-children and Traveller children who are familiar with the street environment from a young age, while often remaining integrally involved with their

families: their culture is one in which early independence for children is quite acceptable, and the streets may form an integral part of the environment they grow up in.

I shall begin by briefly addressing definitional problems, followed by an examination of the historical background to street-children and the present day origins and lives of street-children in Sudan and Ireland. I shall then conclude by presenting a conceptual model which allows us to examine the rationality of street-children's lives, thus leaving behind much of the rhetoric that this emotive topic often produces.

Defining a street-child

'Latchkey child', 'vagrant', 'abandoned', 'waif', 'urchin' – these are just some of the terms synonymous with 'street-child'. The standard United Nations definition says a street-child 'is any minor for whom the street (in the widest sense, including unoccupied dwellings, wastelands, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults'. However this definition is quite weak, grouping together as it does children of vastly different characteristics and circumstances. UNICEF has developed a typology which recognises that there are different types of street-children and which differentiates between children according to their degree of involvement in street-life and family contact. Its categories include children at high risk of street-life involvement, children *on* the streets, children *of* the streets and abandoned children.

Children at high risk are generally urban children who, because of extreme poverty and deprivation in their homes, or inadequate care and supervision by parents who are working, are at high risk of becoming involved in street-life.

Children on the street are children who spend most of their time in the streets or markets, usually as child workers. They maintain a strong family link, perhaps returning home at night having spent all day away. The families are usually very poor and highly deprived, living in home environments lacking basic necessities, and the children can be characterised as having primarily an economic involvement with street-life, perhaps making a substantial contribution to the overall family income, or obtaining the basic necessities for themselves. Few attend school regularly, the street being their main learning ground.

Children of the street, in contrast, are children who have in some sense chosen to fully participate in street-life, not just at an economic level. They usually have a family accessible to them whom they may visit from time to time, but the street is their principal home. There may be a developmental continuum from a child on the street to a child of the street, and any child may be located at a point along this continuum, and may move along it.

Abandoned children are those who have no home to go to, perhaps because of the death or rejection of parents, and the unavailability of extended family. Rejection may be a response to profound economic disadvantage as much as rejection of the child *per se*.

In Colombia, colloquial terms used to describe street-children are very revealing in capturing the distinctions between different stages of 'streetism' and in conveying the idea of a hierarchy of street-involvement. In general, Colombian street-children are referred to as *gamines*. Gamines may work part-time on the streets to supplement family income. They become involved with street-life at a young age, usually while living at home full-time. The majority are relatively law-abiding although they may be involved in petty theft, violation of labour laws, glue sniffing or minor drug-taking. As gamines become older, they sometimes live with other youths – outdoors, in a shack or with an adult patron – and become self-supporting, often through illegal activities. Older street-youth, usually in their mid to late teens, are referred to as *largos*, and these youths are integrally involved in the street-culture, which may be associated with violent crime and involvement with older criminals. Largos often act as the middle link between the world of the gamine with whom they may have a relationship as simultaneous protector and exploiter, and that of the hardcore street-culture.⁴ The lives of Colombian and Latin American street-children appear harsher and more crime-related than those of street-children in Africa – the drug culture that dominates in these countries is probably a very significant factor differentiating the experiences and dangers to which street-children in the two regions are exposed.

Perhaps the most surprising finding to emerge from application of this typology is that as many as 90% of street-children in Latin American countries (where most of the work on street-children has been done) are children *on* the street,⁵ and only a fraction, about 10-20%, are children *of* the street, whether runaways, abandoned or orphaned. In Lima, Peru, it has been found that only 3% of street children actually live on

the streets;⁶ in Colombia, 61% of children were found to have retained regular links with their families.⁷ Lusk⁸ in Juarez, Mexico, found that only 5% of street-children actually lived on the street on a full-time basis, and 15% slept regularly in the street environment but retained regular links with their families. In fact, the abandoned or rejected child, which is the popular conceptualisation of the classic street-urchin, accounts for only 3% to 6% of the total street-child population and is much rarer than is commonly believed.

Thus, the 'typical' street-child is not abandoned, orphaned or even homeless, but is integrally involved with his or her family. He or she has little regular participation in normal socialisation influences for children, such as school, and becomes involved in street activities at a young age, often for economic reasons. Through his/her work or begging, the child often is a vital part of the family's economic unit. When expressed in these terms, it is evident that some of the characteristics of Third World street-children may be similar to those of children in our own society, namely the children of Travellers who, in many cases, live with their families on the side of the road, and who are sometimes to be found working, playing or begging on the streets of our cities and towns.

Legal-historical background

Street-children have generally appeared during conditions of social upheaval and turbulence. In Latin America, where the phenomenon of street-children is most obvious, its origins can be traced to the 1950s, which saw massive demographic changes and urbanisation so that today countries like Mexico and Brazil have among the most urbanised populations in the world, and the largest street-child populations.

Massive urbanisation and poverty were also responsible for the creation of street-children in Europe, as in, for example, the Industrial Revolution in England in the 1800s. It was at this time that street-children also became a feature of the streets of Dublin, albeit for different reasons (see below). A brief examination of attitudes in England to its vagrant children is relevant here, because the legal position that emerged in England at this time is the basis of *current* vagrancy law in Ireland and Sudan, both of which were colonies of England and inherited many legal norms directly from there without reference to cultural

appropriateness (e.g. the applicability of vagrancy laws in a country where nomadism is a way of life for a proportion of the population).

The criminalisation of vagrancy in England (and by default in Ireland and Sudan) has its roots in the societal perception of vagrants in the mid-nineteenth century. Children were not exempt from such portrayal and, as today, were perceived as a social threat. In their annual report in 1882, the Liverpool Sheltering Homes expressed their worries that 'the miserable and helpless poor were becoming a danger to the state and the *children of the streets* were the raw material from which the dangerous classes were formed'.⁹ Inherent in this attitude was the motivation for addressing the problem, and informed such solutions as the poor house system, which simply sought to remove children from the streets.

The street-children of Victorian England have been romanticised through their portrayals as *Oliver Twist* characters, but the reality was probably somewhat different. Little sympathy seems to have existed for these 'street-arabs' who were 'bold, pert and dirty as London sparrows but pale and feeble and sadly inferior to them in plumpness of outline'.¹⁰ These children had an identity quite distinct from the other sub-cultural groups of the urban landscape and Hodder¹¹ cites reports of 'more than 30,000 naked, filthy, roaming, lawless and deserted children quite distinct from the ordinary poor' in London alone. He notes that an examination of 1,600 of these 'street-arabs' found that 306 had lost either one or both parents, 116 had run away from home, 170 slept in lodging houses, 219 had never slept in beds and 162 had endured several periods of imprisonment.

Attribution for this state of affairs was sought in terms of individual deficiencies or deviancies, which placed responsibility for 'unacceptable' behaviour upon the individual rather than broader societal inequalities. Frank Gray summed up this argument by saying: 'Youth on the road has little to do with the unemployed situation in England.... Probably the most important contribution factor in the presence of large numbers of boys on the road, in the casualty wards and ultimately in our prisons, is the attitude of the mind of youth towards the realities of life. Young men of today, those particularly between the ages 16 and 26, appear to lack stability and purpose in life and are irresponsible and casual, and above all are hostile to the slow and difficult steps which alone make for success.'¹²

Thus, vagrancy became associated with laziness, moral ineptitude, and a potentiality for criminality. The Vagrancy Act

introduced in Britain is a product of this moral climate and states: 'every person wandering abroad and lodging in any barn or outhouse, or in any cart or wagon, not having a visible means of subsistence, and not giving a good account of himself,... shall be deemed a rogue and vagabond, and shall be guilty of an offence punishable by three months' imprisonment'. This is the legal status of vagrancy in Ireland and Sudan today: vagrancy is a criminal state, punishable by fines, short terms of imprisonment, or culture-specific punishments (whipping).

While the wording of the Vagrancy Act may seem historically bounded, the thinking which shaped this legal position is still in evidence today. It is still the case that both street-children and Traveller children are often viewed by the broader society as deviants or misfits, a product of dysfunctional communities who are themselves to blame for their state of marginalisation and poverty.

Street-children in Sudan and Ireland: historical comparisons and contrasts

As well as the colonial legacy of British laws, Sudan and Ireland share other historical similarities in the context in which street-children can be linked to conditions of civil unrest and famine.

First mention of the presence of street-children in Ireland is in the seventeenth century in which periodic unrest and food shortages gave rise to terrible social conditions. Robbins notes that there were many wandering orphans whose parents had been slaughtered or who had died from famine conditions, and 'great masses of homeless, hungry beggars crowded into the cities and larger towns'.¹³ In 1669, a commission was set up in Dublin to study ways of dealing with 'the great horde of destitute men, women and children who were roaming its streets'. In the early eighteenth century, the problem of child vagrancy was again noted by Robbins: 'Many of the beggars who crowded the streets of Dublin...were children. Some were probably orphans and others may have been deserted by parents unable to maintain them in the conditions of great hardship that prevailed'. However, the attitude towards these children at the time was not necessarily sympathetic, and Dublin Workhouse

Papers cynically commented: 'These kinds have either brothers, sisters, cousins, or some neighbours' children now in service in Dublin. These sort of relations do both shelter and support these vagabond youth...; and the girls lurk in cellars and the boys do in stables. Thus a very wicked brood increases'.¹⁴

During the famine years of the 1840s, the poorhouse system absorbed the majority of destitute and unwanted children, but it must be presumed that there was also a large population of homeless, unaccompanied or orphaned children. Around this time, Robbins reports: 'Tu Mayo, hungry children gathered along the roadside'¹⁵ and the situation of children in the urban areas was equally destitute. Similar conditions have been experienced in Sudan over the past decade with similar results for children. In recent times, Sudan has witnessed the collapse of rural economies due to drought, the resumption of bitter civil war in the South since 1983, the famine of 1984, and the resultant displacement of 2-3 million people (mainly from the West and South). As a result of these factors, the numbers of street-children evident on the streets of Khartoum, Sudan's capital city, is estimated by UNICEF to have risen from 2,000 in 1978 to 25,000 in 1990.¹⁶

Similarly, Irish Travellers may also have their origins in conditions of famine and unrest; while many sources suggest that the Travellers have a rich history dating back many centuries, their numbers were probably swollen by those rural poor evicted during the Cromwellian era in the seventeenth century and those forced into a life of vagrancy by famine in the nineteenth century.¹⁷

Street-children in Sudan and Ireland: the contemporary scene

In this section, I shall discuss briefly the lives of contemporary street-children. References to the situation of Sudanese street-children are based on interviews with 78 street-children and some of their families by the author in Khartoum in late 1990. Fifty-four children were interviewed on streets and near market places and another 24 in SABAH, a street-child organisation which offers children a safe place to sleep, a meal and medical treatment without requiring them to give up street-life involvement. Material on children of Travellers is drawn from

secondary sources. One criticism that might be raised about drawing comparisons between street-children in Sudan and the children of Travellers in Ireland is that only a small proportion of Traveller children actually become involved in street activities, like playing in the street environment, begging, or calling door to door (though many more could be termed children *on* the street in the sense described earlier). Similarly only a small percentage of those children at high risk of street-life involvement in Sudan end up *on* or *of* the streets. However both Traveller children and many urban poor children in Khartoum share similarities in that they grow up in close proximity to the street, and their developmental experiences differ from those of children of the dominant cultures in both societies.

A. Background and social demographic characteristics

Interestingly, the profile of street-children in Sudan exhibits greater diversity than that of their Latin American equivalents, probably as a result of the more recent origins of the phenomenon in Sudan. Street-children in Khartoum were found to be, firstly, children who were born in Khartoum and were part of the settled urban poor; secondly, children who had come to Khartoum with their families from other regions of Sudan, mainly the South and West because of emergency factors; and, thirdly, children who came unaccompanied by parents or adult guardians to Khartoum. These accounted for 15%, 34% and 51% of the street-child population respectively.

The 51% of children who came unaccompanied by adults to the city were from a wide variety of backgrounds. The train line was an important factor influencing the origin of these children and the majority were from towns of the Central Region which is directly linked to Khartoum by rail. Fathers' occupations included soldiers, farmers, mill workers, and general employees in urban centres. These towns also have large displaced populations and it is more than likely that some children were originally from other areas and living in displacement camps in these urban centres. Children also came from the Western, Northern and Eastern regions. A few were also from the South, as a result of war and separation from families.

However, nearly half of all street-children had families available locally, at least in physical terms. As in the Latin American case, these children typically were from urban sprawl or displaced communities, situated mainly on the periphery of Khartoum. The characteristics of these communities range from the small mud houses of the more established population to the

stick and sack-covered tukel structures of the mainly Southern, recently displaced population. Various stratification levels exist among Khartoum's urban poor, as newer arrivals become integrated with the more established families, many of whom came as migrants to the city twenty years earlier or more. The famine-driven Western arrivals of 1984 have become part of this adaptive process and are now regarded as an integral part of the shanty communities. The children who came to Khartoum with their families exhibited characteristics of both these more established families and those of the especially vulnerable, more recently displaced families. Inadequate sanitation and water facilities are problems for both communities but obtaining food, shelter and access to health facilities are particular problems for the recently displaced.

The families of street children in Khartoum generally work in the informal economy, their labour is not recorded in official labour statistics and their economic contribution is not included in calculating GNP. But their contribution, while generally unrecognised officially, is a vital and integral part of the urban economy. In many ways, the occupations undertaken by the parents of street-children are simple services, thus establishing a symbiotic relationship between them and the main population of the city. Men work as house guards, water sellers, labourers and petty sellers, while women work selling tea in the market areas, taking in washing or brewing local beer. Street children are engaged in an extension of this informal economy, making charcoal stoves from waste tin and scrap metal found in Khartoum's dumps, or collecting waste paper to make and sell paper bags.

The symbiosis mentioned above between the urban poor and the longer established population in Sudan is paralleled in the traditional economic relationship of Irish Travellers with the settled population. Crowley and Collins¹⁸ recount how older Travellers would collect porter bottles off the dumps, wash them in the river and sell them back to the pubs. Some of the other services traditionally supplied by Travellers include house to house collection of old furniture and clothes for re-sale in the market, recycling of waste metal from the city dumps, and door to door selling. Traditionally, children participated from a young age in the economic activities of their parents, and many young girls went from door to door with their mothers collecting old clothes, while boys travelled around collecting scrap with their fathers. Children were a common sight selling and dealing in small town squares on market days, and young children begged

with their mothers on the streets and door to door.

While this is still the case to some extent, the global trend towards urbanisation has affected Irish Travellers: by the 1980s half the total Travelling population was concentrated around the cities of Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick, with a quarter living in the Dublin area.¹⁹ The living conditions on some of these urban sites have been compared to those of some Latin American squatter settlements²⁰ and the Travelling People Review Body has criticised the situation whereby there are 'large numbers of caravans parked along streets, roads and recreational areas (of cities and urban areas), with several hundred occupants who are obliged to exist without running water, sanitation or refuse collection'.²¹ Irish Travellers have other similarities with the Third World's urban poor in that they often live in seriously overcrowded conditions, have high illiteracy rates and a very young population structure (61% under 15 years, compared to 31% for the whole population), and experience infant and mortality rates three times those of the settled population.²² The cultural and material exclusion that characterises the lives of street children and their families in Sudan is thus echoed in the experiences of many Travelling people in Ireland.

B. The process of children's street life involvement

The largest single reason given by children in Sudan for involvement in street-life was economic. A number of factors tied for the second most mentioned reason: these were physical abuse at home, neglect and the desire to join friends. In general, however, it was push factors from the home rather than the attractions of street-life that were responsible for children's street-life involvement. For children from outside Khartoum, physical abuse was the most commonly cited reason and, secondly, to look for work. Economic necessity, boredom, and neglect were the most commonly cited factors for Khartoum children. Rather than concentrating on a list of reasons and statistics, two case studies probably best highlight these children's situations.

Case Study 1. Santino is twelve, from a settled urban community in Khartoum. His family came to Khartoum in 1967. His parents are divorced and his father has remarried. Economically, the family is comfortable enough but his father's occupation as a labourer means he is out of the house all day. Santino used to go to school, but started dropping out, preferring to spend his time and money for school with some boys he met on the streets. Eventually his father found out and,

after talking it through, agreed his son could leave school and work instead as a bag-seller in the markets. Through this activity, he met a group of street-boys and lived with them for two months. Eventually he was found by his brother and returned home. Soon after, he returned to the streets because 'I can't stay around the house all day doing nothing'.

Case Study 2. Hamza is from Nyala in West Sudan and has been in Khartoum for only two months. He came by train with a group of boys he met in his home region. He came to Khartoum looking for work. He is thirteen and the eldest in his family. His father works as a truck loader but the job is not regular nor the money fixed. Conditions at home, he said, were pretty desperate when he decided to leave. Hamza heard stories that work was available in Khartoum so he discussed his plan to leave with his parents. They gave their permission but asked him to return to visit.

The involvement process for children of Irish Travellers in street-life also begins at a young age as children become incorporated in the economic activities of their parents, whether it be door to door collections, road-side or market selling or begging. One resource which could empower the entrepreneurial skills and independence of Traveller children, widening the opportunities available to them in later life, is appropriate schooling and vocational training. However, given the mouo-cultural (settled) curriculum and the structuring of the school system to suit the dominant way of life, access to school for Travellers is not easy. As recently as 1984, 50% of Traveller children aged 6 to 12 did not attend school at all and an estimated 90% of children over the age of 12 had stopped attending school.²³ This lack of educational access restricts the employment opportunities open to Traveller children – it cannot be seen as surprising if some turn to crime as a way of coping with the constraints of their lives. This is reflected in the comments of a young Traveller who said that without the efforts of the Dublin Travellers' Education and Development Group 'We might be around the streets robbing or begging or getting into trouble of some sort. There isn't much on the dole to give your mother... which just serves to give the settled community more fuel to support their short-sightedness and prejudices.'

Conclusion: towards a conceptualisation of street-children

From many of the comments and portrayals given above, it is easy to see how street-children have become associated with concepts of delinquency or deviancy. In fact, Cosgrave includes as a core definitional variable in his conceptualisation of Third World street-children those children who 'operate under a different set of norms from the community at large'.²⁴ He goes on to outline a nine-point typology of 'street-children' in which, predictably enough, children with 'no effective family involvement' and with 'pervasively non-conforming' or anti-social behaviour are classified as 'street-children'. However, those children who also have 'no effective family involvement' but are not involved in deviant behaviour are not 'street-children'.²⁵ A dangerous implication of such a model is the temptation to seek explanations for 'pervasively non-conforming' behaviour in terms of individual personality traits or pathologies. The logical extension of this thinking is to seek intervention strategies which serve to punish or correct. The paradox is that while the deviancy model is probably the least widely recognised conceptual model of street-children, it is the most widely implemented. In both Sudan and Ireland, the most common point of contact between official channels and street-children is through the criminal justice system.

From my conversations with street-children in Sudan, I found in their accounts of their lives no evidence of strangeness or deviance. Although abnormal by broader societal norms, the child's involvement in street-life was in many cases an appropriate adaptation to an unhealthy or unstimulating home or community environment, or a way of satisfying basic needs given strong environmental constraints. Similarly, though their home/community environment is usually not unhealthy or unstimulating, children of Travellers are seeking to develop in a way that is adequate and appropriate to their unique culture, in spite of being hampered by a lack of support and understanding from the settled population.

For developing a conceptual model of Third World (and other) street-children, what is needed is a system which provides a framework for understanding how certain behaviour patterns which might appear pathological or dysfunctional in fact have

adaptive properties. The process by which children develop into street-children is characterised by a degree of rationality which is not obvious if the observer begins with the end point, the child in the street.

Only by detailing the process, and by examining the situational, familial psychological factors that are responsible for street-life involvement, do the rational components of the child's behaviour become obvious, and the focus changes from asking what makes this group of children 'different' to examining the different choices that street-children have both adapted and created for themselves. There is evidence to suggest, at least in the Third World context, that rather than being the most victimised section of the urban poor, street-children are in fact nutritionally, emotionally and intellectually better off than many children from similar circumstances who have remained at home.²⁶

Street-children are viewed negatively by the vast majority of people and the negative aspects of street-life are constantly focused on by both popular and welfare literature. The rational choice approach offers an alternative that attempts to identify the positive or adaptive elements of street-life involvement. A principal implication of this approach is to develop intervention strategies that seek to *empower* children rather than 'rehabilitate' them. By recognising that behaviour is broadly rational in so far as the child acts to benefit him or her self, then the answer is not necessarily to remove the child from the street environment (and source of livelihood) but to strengthen his/her skills and work opportunities in the street in a way that is developmentally appropriate. While the ultimate challenge is to ensure that no child, whether in Ireland or Sudan, is forced into street-life by poverty or lack of opportunities (e.g. educational), the immediate challenge is to address the reality of their lives and create for them a safer, more supportive and less disadvantaged environment.

Footnotes

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