

Profile of street children utilizing shelter home services in Mumbai, India

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Abstract

Background: Street children run away from their homes because of poverty, neglect, abuse and hunger. The continuous exposure to harsh environments made them vulnerable to substance use. The main objective of this study was to determine factors influencing existing life style and addiction.

Methodology: This was a cross sectional study through consecutive random sampling method. Data was collected by interviewing street children after rapport building. Statistical test like mean, standard deviation, chi square were used to analyze data.

Results: Total 100 street children aged 6 – 18 years were studied. School dropout including never went to school at all were 72%. Daily and occasional contact with parents was seen among 70% children. For earning money, jobs like rag picking, house maid servant, selling flowers and balloons were commonly performed. Tobacco use was observed among 83% subjects.

Conclusion: Easy money and access to addictive substances with no education is compelling street children to continue their miserable life. Earlier intervention by Shelter homes and inter-sectoral coordination may help street children in long way.

Keywords: Street children, drug abuse, shelter home, de-addiction

1. Introduction

Street children exist in every part of the world. Most are found in large urban areas of developing countries. The problem has worsened across the globe in recent years because of economic problems, political changes, civil unrest, increasing family separations and conflicts, the communicable diseases and natural disasters.

The desperate situation of the poor families forced children to live and work in street and supplement the meagre family income. Trapped in poverty, parents often neglected their youngsters, or even abandoned. The aftermath is that these children with or without family contact ventured on to the street in search of shelter and food.

2. Objectives

To study socio-economic profile and assess the factors influencing substance use among street children.

3. Material & Methods

3.1 Study population: This was a cross sectional study conducted among street children who availed the monthly get-together services of shelter home located in a metropolitan city.

3.2 Study period: Five months (November 2010 to March 2011)

3.3 Sampling technique & sample size: The maximum prevalence of tobacco use among children is 80% from previous studies done in India [1-3]. Therefore p is considered as 80. The sample size was calculated by the formula $\frac{4 \times p \times q}{l^2}$ where p= prevalence q= 100-p and l= allowable error.

Allowable error is considered as 10% of p. So, the sample size was taken as 100.

The study participants were selected by consecutive random sampling technique from the attendance register of the monthly *get together*. In every visit first 20 newly registered children were selected.

3.4 Selection criteria

3.4.1 Inclusion criteria: Street children of age group 6 to 18 years, who attended monthly mela for first time from November 2010 to March 2011.

3.4.2 Exclusion criteria: Children less than 6 years.

3.4.3 Data collection: Data was collected using pre-validated questionnaire through personal interview in the presence of NGO worker that made children comfortable in answering questions.

3.4.4 Statistical analysis: Data was analyzed using SPSS software version 16. Descriptive statistics like mean, percentage, frequencies and proportion were used. Chi-square test was used to determine the association between different variables.

4. Results

Table 1 shows 57 boys and 43 girls participated in the study. 46% children dropped out from school, 67% were staying on pavements followed by chowpaty and railway station. The parental contact was maintained by 66% while 30% children had no contact. The main reason for coming on street was poverty (76%) and curiosity. 23% children worked as street vendor selling flowers and balloons. 19% children worked as rag picker.

Table 1: Demographic profile of street children

Particulars	Frequencies
Number of subjects	
Boys	57
Girls	43
Schooling	
Never went to school	26
School drop out	46
Present location of street children	
Pavement	67
Chowpaty	12
Railway station	10
Daily contact with parents	
Yes	66
No	30
Reason to be a street child	
Poverty	76
Out of curiosity	14
Employment types	
Street vendors	23
Rag picking	19

Table 2: Association between employment status and education

Status	Employed	Unemployed	Total
Left School including dropout	68	4	72
School continued	19	9	28
Total	87	13	100

Chi square- 12.6, Degree of freedom= 1, p< 0.001

Table 2 reveals that those children who left school started working for survival. This association was statistically significant. The availability of money and life pressure leads to using drugs.

Table 3: Type of substances used by street children

Substance abused	Frequency
Tobacco in all forms	83
Alcohol	12
Charas & Ganja	16
Glue solution	8
Fruit beer	2

(Responses are not mutually exclusive)

Table 3 shows that 83% children were using tobacco as the most widely used substance. Children also informed about use of alcohol, charas, ganja and glue solution as substances for use as well as addiction. Peer pressure remains as the reason responsible for starting substance use (Table 4).

Table 4: Etiology of starting substance abuse

Reason to abuse drugs	Frequency	Percentage
Peer pressure	25	56
Habit in family	9	20
Inquisitiveness	6	13
Stress	5	11
Total	45	

The wages earned were handed over to parents by 59% children and 23% purchased drugs / substances. Maximum boys started addiction in the age 10-12 years while girls did the same in 6-8 years.

Table 5: Association between schooling and substance abuse

Substance abuse	Yes	No	Total
Schooling	3	25	28
No schooling	42	30	72
	45	55	100

Chi square – 18.47, DF =1, p= 0.001

Table 5 explains significant statistical association between addictions among children who had left school. As time duration on street increased (4 to 10 years), the addiction was seen among 33% children. After attending de-addiction services, 42% children tried to stop consumption of drugs

5. Discussion

The present study examined 100 street children (6 years to 18 years). There were 57 boys (mean age 13 years) and 43 girls (mean age 12.7 years). Similar percentages are quoted in a study by Action aid [4]. Higher percentage for boys is reported in other studies [5, 7]. But girls’ population seem to be increasing as compared to previous study from Delhi [8]. The mean age for boys is similar to the previous studies [9, 11]. This suggests that the age group when children are coming to the streets is more or less same.

The children in the age group 11-14 years were maximum in number Similar finding is observed by Peter Ndeboc [12]. The inclination towards education was very less (28%) and school dropout rate was 44%. The school dropout is reported as 42% by Action Aid [4], 49.6% by Reddy *et al.* [9] and 50.5% by Save the Children, an NGO [8]. The illiterate children are 28% [13]. Current study also reported similar figures for illiteracy. The highest numbers of children are not attending school in Zambia [14]. The reasons for school dropout were never interested (65.91%), poverty (36.3%) and parental inhibition (22.7%). Poverty and cost associated with going to school have been reported as reasons for illiteracy among children [9, 15]. Hutments are seemed to be the most preferred place for stay due to extreme poverty [4, 8, 16, 17]. As time has lapsed, more percentages of street children are found staying on pavements.

The daily contact with family members had alarmingly decreased in our study. The higher percentage of children has maintained family contact in some studies [8, 11, 18]. EDMH (2009) has reported only 40% children maintaining any relationship with their parents [19]. Poverty, curiosity, disturbed home conditions and family relations [4], domestic violence and wandering have been cited as the reasons for leaving home [9]. This finding is supported by Ahmedabad Study Action Group [20]. Gurumurthy R. has added that children are abandoned by their families or sent to cities to earn money due to families’ intense poverty [21]. Thus the need for survival has brought the children to the street [12 22].

Most of the children earned money by street vending and rag picking. Next preferred work by girls was to be house maid servant. Same occupations have been reported from Metro cities [4, 5, 17, 22, 24, 26]. Around 15% street children are engaged in domestic work as per Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, Government of India [23]. In view of a ban on plastic bags, the jute bags made by the Street Children’s Association have been made available in the market [25]. The street children contribute larger share of their earnings towards family income. After food and clothes, money is used to procure substances, largely tobacco and pan- masala [8, 12]. 24% children admitted that they were addicted to charas,

ganja and glue solution. In Delhi, 22% children have admitted that they had used drugs^[8]. The children not attending schools are engaged in drug use. This finding is statistically significant.

Almost 83% children used tobacco in various forms including smoking, chewing, gutkha and masher - a dental powder. Similar prevalence is also reported by other studies^[11, 17, 27-31]. The mean age of substance use was 12.3 years for tobacco. It was also noted that that girls had begun tobacco use from 6 to 8 years of age. The reasons cited for substance use were peer pressure (56%), habit in family (20%), inquisitiveness (13%) and stress relief (11%). Peer pressure for using tobacco and illicit drugs has been prominently reported by Sarangi *et al.*^[32]. Benegal further added that 40% children tried to quit drugs but they were unsuccessful^[33]. In current study, 42% did try to quit drugs. As time spent by children on street increased, the prevalence of substance abuse increased even though it was not statistically significant.

6. Conclusion

The street children are continuing their miserable life as before. To face the challenges of life, they are engaged in occupation, compromising education and family life. The peer pressure and availability of addictive substances are favouring for drug use/ abuse. The technical education, drug de-addiction services and coordination between railways, local administration and shelter homes may help in earlier intervention to repatriate street children back to their homes.

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7.1 Ethical clearance: This study is approved by institutional ethics committee.

7.2 Conflict of interest: None.

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