

STREET CHILDREN, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND PUBLIC HEALTH: A Critique and Future Directions

Catherine Panter-Brick

Department of Anthropology, University of Durham, Durham, UK;

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■ **Abstract** This review presents a critique of the academic and welfare literature on street children in developing countries, with supporting evidence from studies of homelessness in industrialized nations. The turn of the twenty-first century has seen a sea change of perspective in studies concerning street youth. This review examines five stark criticisms of the category “street child” and of research that focuses on the identifying characteristics of a street lifestyle rather than on the children themselves and the depth or diversity of their actual experiences. Second, it relates the change of approach to a powerful human rights discourse—the legal and conceptual framework provided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—which emphasizes children’s rights as citizens and recognizes their capabilities to enact change in their own lives. Finally, this article examines literature focusing specifically on the risks to health associated with street or homeless lifestyles. Risk assessment that assigns street children to a category “at risk” should not overshadow helpful analytical approaches focusing on children’s resiliency and long-term career life prospects. This review thus highlights some of the challenging academic and practical questions that have been raised regarding current understandings of street children.

INTRODUCTION: A SHIFT OF PERSPECTIVE

The presence of children living on the street has elicited emotive public concern, been given considerable media coverage, and in the late twentieth century, has become a matter of priority for national and international child welfare organizations. Publications in both academic and welfare literature have emphasized the sheer scale of the worldwide problem, have sought to explain the root causes of this phenomenon, have summarized the identifying characteristics of street children worldwide, and have documented the dire consequences of a street lifestyle for children’s health and development. Titles such as *A Growing Urban Tragedy* (Agnelli 1986), *Causes and Characteristics of the Street Child Phenomenon* (le Roux & Smith 1998), and *Homelessness is not Healthy for Children* (Wright 1990) capture the essence of such concern.

The turn of the twenty-first century has seen a sea change in most of the writing concerning street youth. The term street children itself has almost disappeared from the welfare and analytical literature, which now uses different appellations to refer to street children and other underprivileged groups. Children themselves, of course, are still on the streets, easily visible in the great majority of urban centers. What has been called the global or “worldwide phenomenon of street children” (le Roux 1996) has neither vanished from sight nor effectively been solved. However, current perspectives tend not to demarcate street children so radically from other poor children in urban centers or to conceptualize the homeless in isolation from other groups of children facing adversity. Welfare agencies now talk of “urban children at risk” (Kapadia 1997), which conceptualizes street children as one of a number of groups most at risk and requiring urgent attention. There is accumulated evidence that children move fluidly on and off the streets and that the street does not represent the sum total of their social networks or experiences. A dialogue between academics and welfare practitioners has also been instigated to broaden the insights gained by people working with different categories of unaccompanied, institutionalized, abused, refugee, street, or working children (Boyden & Mann 2000).

In essence, the change in perspective reflects a shift of attention from the street as the primary focus of concern (as an unacceptable or unhealthy environment for children) to the children themselves (paying close attention to the diversity of their actual experiences and their own strategies for coping with adversity). Current work tends to examine the lives of street children in light of more general analyses of poverty, social exclusion, coping strategies, vulnerability and resilience in adversity.

This review begins with a critique of the category “street child,” highlighting the problems generated by the categorization of children based on the apparent characteristics of a street lifestyle. It then relates the change of approach to the powerful human rights discourse—the legal and conceptual framework provided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—and to new directions in research emphasizing children’s own capabilities in coping with adversity. Finally, it examines literature focused specifically on risks to health in the context of street or homeless lifestyles. In short, this review highlights some of the challenging intellectual and practical questions raised by asking who are street children, how their rights might be safeguarded, and why they are a group at risk.

IDENTIFYING STREET CHILDREN: FIVE CRITICISMS

Deceptively simple, the term street child has proved problematic. A basic definition of the term is “a homeless or neglected child who lives chiefly in the streets” (*Oxford Dictionary*). The statement emphasizes two peculiarities about street children: the *place* they occupy (the streets) and the absence of proper contacts or *links* with adults in the family home and in society. This encapsulates much of the thinking behind studies of street children in the 1980s. Such work was concerned with establishing the hallmarks of a street lifestyle and the characteristics of street

children in terms of their use of public spaces and their links with family and public institutions.

Recent literature has argued that the appellation “street children” is problematic for several reasons. First, it is a generic term that obscures the heterogeneity in children’s actual circumstances. Second, it does not correspond to the ways many children relate their own experiences or to the reality of their movements on and off the street. Third, it is imbued with pejorative or pitying connotations. Fourth, it deflects attention from the broader population of children affected by poverty and social exclusion. Indeed, “street children” is a construct that reflects various social and political agendas. These are strong criticisms, which go some way toward explaining why “street children” is a difficult working concept and why other terms of reference or appellations have emerged in recent analytical literature.

A Generic Term Obscuring Differences in Children’s Circumstances

The first difficulty, the need to recognize that street children are not a homogeneous group but experience very different circumstances and lifestyles, was already obvious more than 20 years ago. Welfare agencies, in particular UNICEF and Save the Children, have reworked their definition of street children many times, finding it difficult to devise meaningful statements about these children as people, to define various categories of street life, and more recently, to identify appropriate categories of “at risk” children (Panter-Brick 2001a).

In the words of Raffaelli & Larson (1999, p. 1): “The term street youth, or street children . . . conceals enormous variation in the experiences of youngsters who share the common condition of being ‘out of place’ in street environments, spending their lives largely outside the spheres typically considered appropriate for children, such as home, school, and recreational settings.” The individuals concerned are all minors under 18 years of age, but from a broad age spectrum including teenage and near-teen youth as well as children as young as 5 (and sometimes, also the infants of homeless parents).

An early consensual definition of street children, formulated in 1983 by the Inter-NGO Programme for Street Children and Street Youth, stated: “Street children are those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word: i.e., unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc. . . .) more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults” (Ennew 1994, p. 15). The United Nations adopted the phrasing: “any boy or girl . . . for whom the street in the widest sense of the word . . . has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults.” For Save the Children Fund, “a street child is any minor who is without a permanent home or adequate protection” (UNESCO 1995, p. 286). There are three important elements in these definitions: the time children spend on the street, the street as a source of livelihood, and the lack of protection and care from adults (le Roux & Smith 1998).

Several terms in these definitions, however, have led to confusion. What is meant by home, family, protection, and a “responsible” adult? Such terms are conceptualized differently across cultures (Hecht 1998). Indeed adult-child relationships may be premised upon a radically different understanding of “normal” childhood. There are communities facing significant poverty where children are the prime caretakers of incapacitated adults and the prime income earners in the household, such that relationships of care, protection, and provision flow from the child to the adult rather than from the adult to the child (Boyden & Mann 2000). Being homeless is also variously rendered across cultures, as *desamparado* (defenceless, unprotected) in Latin America, *furosha* (floating) in Japan, and *khaté* (rag-picker) in Nepal. These terms evoke disaffiliation, transience, and marginal economic work, rather than notions of lack of home or abode (Desjarlais 1996).

It has also been difficult to uphold the typology of children “of the street” and “on the street,” established by UNICEF to differentiate street-based or home-based street children. The distinction here is between children *of* the street—who have a family accessible to them but make the streets their home—and child workers *on* the street—who return at night to their families. This terminology was promoted world-wide (*de la calle/en la calle* in Spanish; *de la rue/dans la rue* in French), but in practice it was found unsatisfactory as children themselves defied these generalizations. Many children sleep both at home and on the streets, and they also spend significant periods of time in residential institutions like orphanages, refuges, or correctional establishments. Other distinctions have been made between abandoned and abandoning street children in the Third World (Felsman 1984), or between runaway and throwaway homeless adolescents in the West, according to the degree of family involvement, the amount of deviant behavior (Cosgrove 1990), or a range of sociological characteristics (Lusk 1992). These and other labels, such as children “without family contact” or “abandoned,” lack precision and have been used ad hoc rather than analytically (Felsman 1984, Glauser 1990, Panter-Brick 2000).

Today, the focus on discrete categories of street lifestyles has fallen into disuse. Efforts to devise a suitable definition and an appropriate typology of street children represented the first steps toward a useful conceptual framework to think about the children in question. A classification of children is still useful, as long as it is understood that categories are neither discrete nor necessarily homogeneous, and that they may not always coincide with children’s own views about their lives. It is with these important provisos that current research makes distinctions between street and working children (Ennew 1994, Barker & Knaul 1991), between street-living and street-working children (Consortium for Street Children 1998), between family-based street workers and independent street workers, or between homeless and working youth (Raffaelli 1999), distinctions that essentially uphold the original UNICEF typology. The category of street children may be “impossibly constructed” (Ennew 2000, p. 171), but there are few practical alternatives available—beyond local terms—to refer to these particular groups of children.

Inadequate Representations of Children's Experiences

A second criticism leveled at earlier studies of street children is that a simple focus on the street tends to promote a unidimensional account of children's lives, which does not do justice to children's actual behaviors and wider social networks.

In his study of Brazilian children, for example, Hecht (1998) asked the question: "How do the children who sleep on the street speak of themselves?" Most interestingly, he sought to explain why some youth describe themselves as street children when their siblings, who lead very similar lives, do not. When does a child consider him or herself a street child? Hecht argued that in the context of Northeast Brazil, the difference of identity hinges on the child's relationship to a mother figure: a street child is one who has abandoned his mother and left the right track. The point is not whether children are *on* or *off* the streets, but how they see themselves in relation to their family and society at large. In his words, some children "work in the street, dance in the street, beg in the street, sleep in the street, but the street is the venue for their actions not the essence of their character" (Hecht 1998, p. 103). Hecht's comparative inquiry of children in poor neighborhoods (*favelas*) is an account of how children interpret for themselves their home and their street lives, which gives a much broader context to their activities and social networks.

Most recent studies agree that portrayals of street children cannot be reduced to a one or two dimensional focus on the street environment, defining the children's existence solely with reference to a physical and/or social dimension (permanence in the street and contacts with responsible adults). Lucchini (1997), for instance, elaborated seven dimensions of a child-street system. In addition to spatial, temporal, and social elements, he considered that dynamic behavior (types of activities), self-identification, motivation vis-à-vis street life, and gender-structured differential access to street environments. This approach served to highlight some striking differences in the life circumstances and negotiated identities of street children in Brazil, Uruguay, and Mexico.

A Stigmatizing Label

The term "street children" has powerful emotional overtones. Common public responses are pity and hostility (Aptekar 1988), with street children perceived as victims or villains. Ironically, the term "street children" itself was widely adopted by international agencies in an attempt to avoid negative connotations for children who had been known as street urchins, vagrants, *gamines*, rag-pickers, glue-sniffers, street Arabs, or vagrants (Williams 1993).

It has been argued that the label street children, now so emotionally charged, does little to serve the interests of the children in question. Consider this statement: "The term has a stigmatising effect, since the child is, as it were, allocated to the street and to delinquent behaviour. The term neither gives consideration to the experience or testimony of the children in question nor to other facets of their identity, which do not necessarily have any relevance to the street. Thus

it becomes a cause of discrimination of the children and triggers or strengthens negative social reactions” (Invernizzi 2001, p. 79). In brief, the label “contributes to a social reaction towards them” (p. 81). Even programs of intervention for street children can result in their discrimination and stigmatization.

This social reaction leads to stereotypes related to gender, ethnicity, and age; for instance, that all street girls are prostitutes (Lucchini 1994, p. 6) and street boys junkies, and that younger children should be pitied but teenagers, especially dark-skinned ones, should be feared (Huggins & de Castro 1996). It also lumps together the homeless, a highly visible but minority group, with home-based street-workers. Thus authors writing on street children (*meninos de rua* in Portuguese, *niños de la calle* in Spanish, *enfants de la rue* in French) will declare that they find the use of this generic term questionable—but retain it for lack of useful alternatives (Invernizzi 2001). Street children themselves may reject it as a pejorative label or conversely endorse it in order to define their shared identity (Baker 1997, p. 145–65, Kilbride et al. 2000).

Limited Viewpoint and Limited Action

Finally, a significant argument in some of the literature is that a focus on street children—easily represented as the symbol of child poverty and social exclusion—concentrates attention toward only the most visible tip of a huge iceberg. “As a target group for policy makers, street children have hijacked the urban agenda . . . to the detriment of other groups of disadvantaged urban children” (Ennew 2000, p. 169). Rizzini et al. (1999, p. 3) also argued: “a focus on street children—however well-intentioned—deflects attention from the broader population of low income children and youth in poverty. . . . Most children’s programs [in Brazil] have directed their attention to a relatively small number of children and youth in the most dire situations.” These authors find compelling reasons for changing policy and program attention in Brazil from street children to all children, with interventions giving social and developmental support “to all children and not just those who face specific risks, such as the risk of being abandoned or abused” (p. 3).

Focusing attention on street children can thus lead agencies to overlook or ignore the much larger problem of urban—and rural—poverty. For Lane (1998, p. 18), however, the distinction between “those that are at greatest risk of taking to street life and those who live in poverty is central to effective prevention strategies”: not all disadvantaged children take to the streets, and those who do are most likely to slip through the nets of broad-based community interventions.

The public discourse on street children as victims of violence—particularly in Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil, and Honduras—has also distracted attention from the issue of widespread poverty and violence affecting children who live at home, and the “quiet, private death that is hunger and disease” (Hecht 1998, p. 146). Indeed there are radically different understandings of violence linked to distinct social groups, reflecting distinct constructions of childhood (Márquez

1999, p. 216–18). Such arguments highlight that international, national, and local action on behalf of specific groups of children in adversity (street youth, abandoned children, child laborers, sex workers) closely reflects the construction and management of a social and political issue.

A Social and Political Issue

It has been argued that both the street children issue and the “homelessness problem” are constructs deftly manipulated to reflect the various agendas and interests of stakeholders such as the welfare agencies. For instance, very large estimates of the number of children in the street are produced to draw attention to the need for the agency’s work. At best, these estimates rest upon largely elastic and nebulous definitions of homeless and working children. At worst, they are made up. The “arithmetic is as symbolic as the children involved” (Ennew 2000, p. 170).

Many publications on street children impress upon their readership the sheer magnitude of the problem. The talk is of numbers, and the numbers cited are huge. Thus 100 million youth are said to be growing up in the streets of urban centers world-wide (UNICEF 1989, cited in Campos 1994). Other estimates have 170 million living on the street (Pinto et al. 1994), or give a range for street children of 30 to 170 million (United Nations 1986, quoted in Barker & Knaul 1991). In Brazil alone, UNICEF estimated in the late 1980s that 7 million youth spent most of their time and/or slept on the street, and this figure readily came to designate homeless children. Hecht (1998, p. 101) suggests the true number of homeless children in Brazil is less than 1% of that figure. The estimate of 7 million in Brazil is certainly an overstatement (Barker & Knaul 1991).

Estimates will vary, of course, in relation to how a mobile population of children is counted and, most importantly, exactly who is considered for inclusion, because the term street children has different meanings in different regions. For example, in the Philippines, it denotes those who “spend most of their time on the streets yet who maintain some regular contact with a family” (UNESCO 1995, p. 117). In contrast, it may denote more strictly those children who at night have no parental home to go to. Thus the estimates of welfare agencies are not always concerned with the same children. Ennew (1994) states categorically: “Neither UNICEF nor the ILO [International Labour Organization] can give reliable or verifiable figures for the number of working children worldwide, including street children. A basic reason for the lack of accurate figures is that no one can agree on definitions. [Numbers] are often cited at the beginning of reports and descriptions of street and working children, but they have no validity or basis in fact” (p. 32).

The definition of homeless youth in industrialized countries is also elastic and can include those who sleep rough, live in shelters, squat, or double up with other families, encompassing the “literally homeless” and the “precariously housed” (Glasser & Bridgman 1999, Chamberlain & Johnson 2001). In Great Britain, Hutson & Liddiard (1994) have argued that estimates of homeless youth tend to be not only inflated by welfare agencies to legitimate their role, but also minimized

by bureaucratic institutions to sidestep legal or financial responsibilities. In brief, the statistics are problematic: They reflect the particular agendas of organizations that collect them, and they are part of the construction and the management of homelessness as a social issue (Hutson & Liddiard 1994).

Summary

The term street children is problematic. It serves to highlight a set of working and living conditions that diverge from accepted norms about children. Thus street children are those who occupy the public spaces of urban centers and whose activities are largely unsupervised by adults, which leads people to view them as different from other children. However, research has convincingly shown that it is important to move beyond a sole focus on the street and that there is more to the lives of children than what is revealed by ad hoc categorizations based on the criteria of physical location, social neglect, and economic activity.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE BEST INTERESTS OF CHILDREN

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which came into force in September 1990, has had a huge impact in defining conceptual frameworks and humanitarian concerns regarding children in adversity. The Convention asserted a number of rights for children worldwide, formulated basic principles to be applied, and created a legal obligation to put these rights and principles into practice. Concern for children in difficult circumstances was no longer a matter of humanitarian and charitable concern, but now is a legal responsibility falling on a state as party to the Convention. The Convention listed the areas where the rights and interests of children must be taken into account—for example, separation from parents, freedom of expression, health, education and employment—and enunciated that in all actions concerning children, “the best interest of the child shall be a prime consideration” (Article 3.1). This universal mandate was carefully worded to formulate a clear principle to empower intervention while leaving room for some flexibility and cultural interpretation (Alston 1994, Van Bueren 1998, Panter-Brick 2000).

Recent publications concerning street children have explicitly referred to children’s rights and their best interests as advocated in the Convention. For instance, The Consortium for Street Children produced *The Human Rights of Street and Working Children*, devised as a practical manual for implementing the Convention (Byrne 1998). UNICEF’s *Implementation Handbook for the Convention*, which adopted a wider brief, considered those who live and work on the street under the heading of “children deprived of their family environment” (UNICEF 1998). To these rights enshrined in international law, Ennew (1995) added some important yet unwritten rights for children outside society and “normal” childhood. These include the right for street children not be labeled, to be correctly researched and counted, to work and have their own support systems respected, the rights to privacy and respect for their individuality (including sexuality), and the right to be

protected from exploitation by the media, activists, or fundraisers (through an exaggeration of children's weaknesses and vulnerability).

A Change of Emphasis from "Needs" to "Rights"

The Convention heralded a change in the prevailing discourse regarding street children and, more generally, children facing adversity. The emphasis moved significantly from highlighting the *needs* of vulnerable children to defending their *rights* as citizens.

Earls & Carlson (1999, p. 72) expressed this change of approach forcefully: "In recent years, the entire concept of childhood has been reconstructed . . . Children are citizens . . . The idea that they are simply immature creatures whose needs must be met by parents or other charitably inclined adults is becoming obsolete. As citizens, children have rights that entitle them to the resources required to protect and promote their development." Street children, however, are socially excluded, an exclusion that begins with lack of access to birth certificates and registration documents, lack of stability of residence, proper education, and health care: This group of children is deprived of citizenship rights. Advocacy on their behalf has therefore featured lobbying for inclusion of children's rights at the national level (for example, in the Brazilian Constitution; Rizzini 1994, pp. 96–97, Klees et al. 2000, pp. 92–95).

Yet the concept of "the child in need" still permeates "the everyday vocabulary" of social work (Woodhead 1990, p. 60). This construct draws a credible veil over any uncertainty or possible disagreement regarding which action might work in the "best interests" of children (p. 62). It is easily taken for granted and applied indiscriminately to all children facing difficult circumstances. There are several reasons why this approach is unsatisfactory (Moss et al. 2000). First, the problem to be addressed is defined "as essentially individual and psychological, not social and structural" (p. 244). Second, the child is "classified as coming from an abnormal family and is constructed, through the language used, as deficient (having a need), weak (being needy), and a subject of charity" (p. 245).

The discourse about children's rights is revolutionary, yet one must tread carefully. The notion that children as individuals have inalienable human rights must be negotiated with the notion of group and family rights (giving children duties and responsibilities toward their elders) prevailing in many non-Western cultures (Alston 1994, Goonesekere 1998, Montgomery 2001, p. 82–85). The notion that minors have rights usually raises questions regarding their developmental and social maturity: To respect or condone a child's choice to live on the streets, to grow up with peers rather than with a family, to work for an income, and to have sex is for many a morally unsatisfactory position. Should the rights discourse be tempered with a measured consideration of children's capabilities—an appreciation of children as individuals with specific competences and maturity, able to discern and adopt those behaviors that, realistically, will improve their quality of life? To make rights contingent upon capacity is, however, problematic—especially where children are concerned, when adults remain the all-powerful adjudicators of their competences (Freeman 1996).

Children as Agents of Change and Capable of Participation

Another significant shift of emphasis, grounded in the UN Convention, was to recognize that promoting the best interests of children is not just a matter of protecting and providing for them, but of listening to them and fostering child participation. There is a careful balance to be struck between the three broad categories of rights in the Convention: rights to protection, provision, and participation. Adults are wont to emphasize the first two, being reluctant to let street children grasp participatory rights—other than by accident (Ennew 2000, p. 176). The third set of rights recognizes that children are “agents of change in their own lives” (Myers 1988, p. 137), which demands that adults recognize that children have agency and manifest social competency (shaping their lives for themselves). This drives the ethics of a program for research or intervention toward necessary consultation and child participation.

It has been forcefully argued that a portrayal of children as “vulnerable, incompetent and relatively powerless in society” (Morrow & Richards 1996, p. 90) is deeply problematic. To present street children as helpless victims of social discrimination does little to recognize their remarkable initiative and ingenuity in coping with difficult circumstances (Ennew 1994, Panter-Brick 2001a). For this reason, research has shifted emphasis from portrayals of vulnerability and dependency to a discussion of children’s coping strategies in the face of adversity: It may be more helpful to identify the factors that help children cope with adversity than to emphasize the problems in their circumstances (Felsman 1989, Engle et al. 1996, Boyden et al. 1998). Thus, several discourses about street children compete for attention. One is journalistic, descriptive, and atheoretical, targeted to mass audiences; another is research-focused and aims to promote critical understanding and to influence effective policy development (Blunt 1994, p. 258). Stark images of children’s vulnerabilities (Portrait 1) coexist with a more dignified portrayal of their lives (Portrait 2).

Portrayals of street children (as victims, villains, dependents, or deviants) also have an impact on types of intervention (Ennew 1994). Interventions focused on “rescuing” children from the streets by placing them back at school or with the family have generally not provided lasting solutions because they tend to ignore children’s own views and all that they have already accomplished for themselves. As stressed in a Save The Children publication, street and working children are not “objects of concern but people. They are vulnerable but not incapable. They need respect, not pity” (Ennew 1994, p. 35). The key to research and project design has changed to working with children rather than for them, thus giving prime importance to child participation.

The development of interactive and participatory research methods has hinged upon the realization that children have social agency and competency and are capable of making informed decisions about their lives and of expressing views and aspirations that may differ from the views held by adults (Ennew 1994; Johnson et al. 1995, 1998; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 1998). The call has been for novel ways of conducting research with children, ways that would prioritize their own perspectives and allow for their participation in the design and implementation of



Portrait 1 Columbia's street children "considered disposable" by hired killers. Photograph by Gilles Peress/Magnum, reproduced in *The Independent*, 30 January 1994: Marginalization, destitution, ill-health.

research objectives (Connolly & Ennew 1996, Johnson et al. 1998). These have included participation of the children themselves in the research process, not just as informants but as researchers, conducting interviews, taking photographs, or shooting videos of their world and of one another. It has also led to new approaches for advocacy—a social mobilization of street and working children at grassroots levels culminating in their participation, even ownership, of national and international forums in which children's rights issues were debated (Swift 1997).

These child-centered approaches do not, however, evade the issue of ethical concerns: involving children as participants rather than subjects raises its own set of ethical problems. The ethics of social research with children are not limited to securing informed consent and respecting children's views: They extend to appropriate ways of collecting, interpreting, and disseminating—without distortion—findings. They are complicated by the disparities in power and status between adults and children and by a consideration of age-related competence (Morrow & Richards 1996). And as Hecht noted for research in Northeast Brazil, there are considerable ethical challenges when working with street youth who lead very violent and vulnerable lives; many of these challenges are wholly unanticipated (Hecht 2000).



Portrait 2 India's railway children at Villupuram station in Tamil Nadu. Photograph by David Maidment/*The Railway Children*, reproduced in the *Streets Apart Magazine*, February 2001: Friendship, social ease.

Summary

Work with street children has turned away from a discourse that categorized them as children in need and emphasized their weaknesses and dependency, in favor of highlighting children's own voices as citizens and their capabilities as agents of change. This reveals a shift in the fundamental assumptions made about children (as active participants rather than underage dependents), which itself brought about fresh approaches regarding appropriate methods for research and interventions on behalf of children. Let us now turn to examine another kind of discourse, one that designates street children as an at risk category.

“AT RISK” CHILDREN AND PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS

In current welfare literature, street children are a category of “children at risk.” This phrase has replaced the one “children in need” and even taken over UNICEF’s appellations “children in especially difficult circumstances” abbreviated as CEDC (Kapadia 1997), and “children in need of special protection” abbreviated as CNSP. Indeed in recent literature the generic category “urban children at risk” tends to replace the terms street and working children (Valentin 1999). But this term of reference may also be ambiguous, analytically unhelpful, stigmatizing for children, and manipulated to serve socio-political agendas. Is “risk” another one of these catch-all phrases that proves under close examination to be an unsatisfactory construct? It does raise the question: “at risk of what?”

The Risk Factors and At Risk Discourse

Given the difficulties that beset earlier categorizations of children *on* and *of* the streets, Hutz & Koller (1999, p. 61) suggested that “perhaps a more appropriate way of classifying street children would be in terms of the risks to which they were exposed” (contact with gangs, use of drugs, school abandonment, inadequate parental guidance) “and the protective factors available to them” (school, supportive social networks, caring adults). These authors noted, however, that risk assessment in research with street children is a particularly complex issue.

In public health, risk factors are variables that predispose an individual to ill-health; the assessment of risk proceeds from a statistical measurement of those factors shown to affect health and well-being. In the case of street children, such risk factors include poverty, family dysfunction, ethnicity, gender, age, education, disability, work experience, and stability of residence. However, it is tempting to generalize from a statistical (and largely empirical) statement regarding specific risk factors to a qualitative (and collective) categorization of the children in question. The quantitative approach to risk—a matter of ordering reality (rendering it into calculable form)—leads to a qualitative assessment of individuals as falling within at risk categories (Dean 1999, pp. 143–44). Thus a statistical statement (being at high or low risk in a specified context) translates into a normative statement—a global narrative regarding groups of children—regardless of context.

This leads to unhelpful assumptions of generalized vulnerability and represents a further instance of categorical thinking about children.

Moreover, although risk factors are based on the calculable, at risk discourses evoke the incalculable—a perception of fear or danger. Particularly when it comes to children, risk anxiety is focused on those who come under public scrutiny, fall outside accepted social boundaries, and are perceived as an endangered or a dangerous group. Risk management in relation to such children is fueled by risk anxiety, honed by “a climate of heightened risk awareness” and the construct of childhood as a protected state in which children should lead safe and carefree lives (Jackson & Scott 1999, p. 87). In discourses about children, there is not only “a growing consciousness of children *at risk*” but also “a growing sense of children themselves as *the risk* . . . as people out of place and excess populations to be eliminated” or controlled (Stephens 1995, p. 13). Views about risk thus present an ambivalence in referring to groups who are especially vulnerable but also to groups who explicitly disturb or violate established social norms. It is precisely because street children are so visibly “out of place,” many of them living a life of “inchoate rebellion” (Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998, p. 383) and self-destruction characterized by violence, sexual exploitation, illiteracy, and haphazard nutrition, that they are the focus of intense concern—whereas their peers in urban centers, living at home in great poverty in slum and squatter settlements, are not.

Specific Risks to Health: Street Children Relative to Their Peers

Categorical statements about street children being *the most* at risk of negative physical, mental, and developmental outcomes abound in the literature. One striking example of the often polemical stance adopted regarding the health outcomes of a street existence is provided by de la Barra who claimed: “Being poor is itself a health hazard; worse, however, is being urban and poor. Much worse is being poor, urban, and a child. But worst of all is being a street child in an urban environment” (de la Barra 1998, p. 46). As for homelessness, Wright (1990b, p. 62) maintained: “it is hard to conceive of a socially defined ‘risk factor’ that is of greater consequence for a person’s physical wellbeing.” Over and above poverty, a homeless existence would expose “persons of all genders and ages” to a characteristic package of disorders (Wright 1990a, p. 84; 1991) identifiable “everywhere” across cultural contexts (Wright & Kaminsky 1993, p. 282). Indeed, by emphasizing the debilitating aspects of street life, most studies have brought street children to prominence as “a category of children whose life circumstances place them at physical and psychosocial risk” (Veale et al. 2000, p. 131).

However, the assessment of risk is problematic because the statistics collected from street children are often suspect in their validity and reliability. Many studies feature samples that are small, ill-defined, or unrepresentative of the homeless or street child population. They also lack in rigor for want of appropriate comparison groups: Homeless street children tend to be compared with Western middle class

children, the gold standard of childhood, rather than with local groups of poor, home-based children who arguably represent a more realistic lifestyle alternative for children in the streets (Panter-Brick 2001b). Moreover, there are few comprehensive overviews of the literature, which includes unpublished academic theses, government reports, and advocacy materials, despite some attempts to produce a compilation of studies by topics or geographical areas (see Mermet 1997, Ennew & Milne 1997, Invernizzi 2001). This makes it particularly difficult to distinguish the risks attributed to homelessness or street life from those associated with socio-economic disadvantage (Holden 1995, Panter-Brick 2001b). Indeed, one review of the health problems of U.S. homeless children asked whether “it is appropriate to focus exclusively on homelessness as a marker of risk” given that homelessness is “one event along the continuum of a child’s experience of poverty” (Ziesemer et al. 1994). And if homelessness is “simply the most visible and exaggerated manifestation of chronic poverty, then broader policy questions must be raised” (Molnar et al. 1990, p. 120).

In terms of physical health, some studies—explicitly designed to compare homeless with home-based children—have challenged the assumption that “all street children are pitiful, pale and thin, malnourished” (Gross et al. 1996). They have highlighted the fact that street children had higher, albeit irregular, income than home-based children and relied on networks of solidarity and care within their peer group to buffer themselves against shortfalls. Indeed one paper concluded bluntly that even in Latin America, “street children fare no worse than other children from similar backgrounds” (Scanlon et al. 1998). A review of the evidence to date (drawing from studies in Honduras, Indonesia, Nepal, Ethiopia, and the United States) concludes that it is not possible to uphold facile generalizations about the health outcomes of street children that would easily demarcate them from other poor children (Panter-Brick 2001b). The results of comparative studies are in any case difficult to interpret, because the health status of individuals included in a sample may reflect selective migration onto the street and/or a bias in favor of those who successfully remain on the street (Panter-Brick et al. 1996).

In terms of mental health, criticisms have also been made of the view that street children necessarily suffer from negative developmental outcomes. Felsman and Aptekar are two authors who argue quite strongly that the majority of street children they have studied (mostly in Colombia) were “clearly without pathology” (Aptekar 1991, p. 328), displayed better mental health than poor counterparts (Felsman 1981), and showed a high level of self-management (Aptekar 1988). Other studies make similar claims (deSouza et al. 1995, Monteiro et al. 1998, review by Raffaelli 1999). One set of authors concluded: “Rather than being the most victimized, the most destitute, the most psychologically vulnerable group of children, street children may be resilient and display creative coping strategies for growing up in difficult environments” (Veale et al. 2000, p. 137). Attention is here paid to street-wise behaviors and remarkable survival skills, which cannot however be equated with invulnerability or mature emotional development (see Kilbride et al. 2000, pp. 6–7). There is also evidence of an habituation to stressful events, which extends

to a downregulation of the physiological responses associated with stress. In two studies using the hormone cortisol as a sensitive marker of anxiety and psychosocial arousal, average cortisol levels for homeless street children were similar to those of middle class children in Nepal (Panter-Brick 2001b) and to those of home-based street workers in Ethiopia (Dobrowolska & Panter-Brick 1998).

In terms of engaging in drug-taking, survival sex, and HIV-risk behavior, studies overwhelmingly ascribe street youth, and street girls particularly, to an at risk category (Scanlon et al. 1998). But as with the measurement of mental health through psychiatric and psychological morbidity, the assessment of drug-taking and sexual health is fraught with significant methodological problems. Mere use of questionnaire data, without triangulation with other methods, is suspect and provides limited cross-sectional information (Ennew & Milne 1997, Hutz & Koller 1999). Few surveys include the screening of home-based and street-based youth for markers of sexually transmitted infections (Porto et al. 1994, Pinto et al. 1994), nor do they corroborate self-reports for common infections (Panter-Brick et al. 2001). Nonetheless, Raffaelli's review (1999, p. 20) concluded that the weight of studies leaves little doubt that homeless youth are at higher risk of abusive sexual relationships and of sexually transmitted infections than are their peers. HIV in particular poses a dramatic challenge in Africa due to the magnitude of the AIDS epidemic and war-related instability (UNICEF 2001), although to date very little research has been conducted on war, HIV-risks, and street children (Inverzinni 2001, p. 92).

Finally, because many street youth live harsh and violent lives (Childhope 1991; Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1994; Human Rights Watch 1996, 1997; Márquez 1999; Berman 2000; Hecht 2000), risks to health include death from violent trauma, suicide, accidents, and murder; however, few survival statistics have ever been published (Raffaelli 1999, p. 18; Huggins & Mesquita 2000). Those deaths represent a brutal end to pervasive social marginalization. Social exclusion is also reflected in the risk of educational failure and poor cognitive performance—although street life can offer opportunities for nonstandard education (Donald & Swart-Kruger 1994, Blunt 1994).

Substantial evidence thus supports the view that street children are a category at risk, but there is also disagreement with a discourse that sets the characteristics of street life in global terms, associating the worst health outcomes with street children by ascription. Specific risks to health need to be rigorously investigated, and not overgeneralized to cover all aspects of health—physical health, mental health, sexual health—which constitute different benchmarks for risk assessment. Otherwise research and public health concerns are in danger of being led by a normative view of at risk categories and marred by a lack of conceptual clarity, rather than focused on the critical appraisal of what constitutes risk. This is true to the extent that the literature on street children is guilty of “systematically ignor[ing] its own findings in favour of predetermined conclusions grounded in Northern, middle class mores” (Bar-On 1997, p. 63).

As Sibert (2000) wisely indicated, what public health professionals would really like to know is whether homeless street children are “uniquely disadvantaged or

whether they form one end of the spectrum of poor children” with respect to risks to health. To achieve this, research on children in adversity needs to be quite extensively overhauled. As emphasized by Holden et al. (1995, p. 176) for the United States, “research on children in poverty has already shifted from comparisons between children in low-income and middle-income families to in-depth analyses of processes mediating poverty’s influences on developmental and health outcomes . . . [To] understand why some homeless children display a host of [mental] health problems and why others survive and succeed, attention should be focused on variations within homeless populations.” What is important to future research are the factors of risk and resilience that shape the long-term coping strategies of individual children, by developing their competence for negotiating high risk situations.

Resilience and Long-Term Career Perspectives

Influential research has argued that a helpful counterpart to the risk discourse is to focus attention on the resilience of children who manage to negotiate extremely difficult circumstances. As Rutter (1987, 2001) explained, resilience is the term used to describe the positive pole of individual differences in responses to stress and adversity. Rutter further emphasized that in the field of psychiatric risk research, there has been a shift of focus not only “from vulnerability to resilience, but also from risk *variables* to the process of *negotiating* risk situations” (1987, p. 316). This represents a useful approach—one that is not constrained by categorical thinking but centers on identifying the protective factors that help individuals cope with adversity.

Research on resilience is by no means simple (Richman & Fraser 2001). In 1990, Rutter (1990, pp. 182–83) made a critically important argument: Research will gain very little if it confines itself to a mechanistic search for protective factors as those sets of *variables* that will predict resiliency with fair consistency (namely, personality features, family cohesion, and external support systems). Instead, it must appraise the developmental and contextual *processes* by which some individuals manage to negotiate adversity (why and how they maintain self-esteem and self-efficacy; how they managed to have effective social networks). It is wrong to assume that vulnerability or protection lies in the variable (e.g., social support) per se, rather than in the active role taken by individuals under adversity: Resilience is a reflection of an individual’s agency.

It is also crucial, but obviously difficult, to appraise how protective factors may work in interaction with each other, to investigate their relative importance over a lifetime, and finally to confirm their relevance across different cultures. The majority of risk research remains based on comparison groups within a cross-sectional design (Neiman 1988). The overwhelming body of work on resilience concerns itself with industrialized countries, such that little information exists on children and adversity in other contexts (Boyden & Mann 2000). Significantly, cross-cultural studies on street youth may not support unilateral conclusions regarding gender

differences in coping with a long-term existence on the street, despite the argument that girls are at higher risk of negative outcomes than their male peers (Raffaelli et al. 2000).

Current work with street children sees further studies on developmental vulnerability and resilience to be fundamental to both research and practical intervention. For street children present us with a “central and pervasive” paradox—“with evidence of developmental risk and vulnerability on the one hand and of resourcefulness, adaptability, and coping on the other” (Donald & Swart-Kruger 1994, p. 169). Indeed, researchers have been fascinated by both positive and negative aspects of their lives and personalities: Barker & Knaul (1991) describe them as “both needy and bold, exploited but street-smart entrepreneurs.” For Felsman, the paradox is that *gamine*s in Colombia stand “at the intersection of human strength and vulnerability” (Felsman 1989, p. 56). These and other authors agree that the best approach is not to generalize over what common factors in street lifestyles lead to at risk situations, but to ask a different order of questions. A pertinent issue relates to how key developmental stressors “combine to produce actual, not just putative, developmental vulnerability” (Donald & Swart-Kruger 1994, p. 173); in many cases, it is the combination of multiple stressors rather than the experience of any single factor that defines an individual’s vulnerability.

Arguably, the concept of a street or homeless career—or the notion of street children having fluid careers—is another fruitful analytic device for moving the literature beyond its habitual snap shot descriptions of children, because it calls for data giving both time-depth and contextual information. The concept of career, used by Goffman (1961) and Becker (1973) in their studies of social deviance, can help appraise for street children the long-term outcomes of social experiences and negotiated identities (Visano 1990, p. 142). For the homeless, self-perceptions and social experiences are the bedrock of career outcomes, as shown in the United Kingdom by Hutson & Liddiard (1994, p. 124) and in Nepal by Baker & Panter-Brick (2000).

It should not surprise anyone to find that the outcomes of homeless careers will differ by cultural context. In Northeast Brazil, Hecht (1998) reported that prison, insanity, or death were the common expectations of life for street children, while also in Brazil, Vasconcelos (quoted in Raffaelli 1999) thus summarized the stark prospects for street girls: They “disappear. They are arrested or they die. They die from venereal diseases, they are sent to mental institutions, they die from abortion, or in childbirth, or they kill themselves.” By contrast, in Nepal, Baker (1998) documented that homeless children could achieve stable employment, marriage and families of their own (see also Baker & Panter-Brick 2000). It is not even well established why there are street children in certain cultures and not in others (Aptekar 1994, p. 195), given the paucity of comparative research linking global to local analyses (see however Mickelson 2000b contrasting the “clean streets” of Cuba with street existence in Brazil and the United States). And while poverty and family dysfunction are ubiquitous causes for homelessness (Glasser & Bridgman 1999), poverty or abuse cannot be held as sole explanations for street children leaving home—when their siblings (and the majority of children) do not (Aptekar

1988, Aptekar 1991, p. 343). An ethnographic focus on the careers of street children in comparison with their peers might help to achieve a more fine-grained understanding of such issues.

Careers are also profoundly influenced by ethnicity (Huggins & de Castro 1996), gender (Barker & Knaul 2000), and disability, as well as age (Aptekar 1988). Moreover, street life is often able to offer payoffs in the short-term, while compromising individuals in the long run (Richter 1991). As Gregori (2000) noted, how Brazilian street children circulate in social spaces and negotiate with a range of institutions is marked by their status as legal minors; when they reach the age of majority, they face a difficult transformation of identity as the institutional support for minors falls away. A career perspective may be a way of articulating more cogently how rights articulate with risks for specific individuals, and how individuals themselves interpret the risks they face, the behavioral choices they make, and the social marginalization they experience.

Summary

Public health concerns for children “at risk” come with several important caveats. First, the risk discourse is helpful if one uses it less as a tool to categorize children and more as a tool to formulate questions of specific importance about children. For instance, one should ask not only what particular aspects of street lifestyles put children’s health at risk, but also what processes enable children to cope with adversity. To turn the emphasis of risk on its head, how does one “support the social and cultural expressions of resilience and coping in ways that effectively support children’s wellbeing” (Boyden & Mann 2000)? The concept of resilience, found useful in emphasizing a situational and developmental perspective and in departing from earlier vocabularies of marginality, does need to be better articulated in actual research with children. Second, research questions must move beyond the search for a package of risk variables and seek instead comparative and longitudinal information on children’s career outcomes in order to appraise their different capabilities to face adversity. In this way, the concepts of risk and resilience would help to provide an overarching view of children whose rights are being jeopardized, moving forward the literature that previously tended to compartmentalize thinking about street children but that now seeks to consider this particular group alongside other groups of underprivileged children.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Current studies are careful to contextualize research on homeless street and working children. They have grown increasingly weary of a discourse that categorizes these youngsters as children in need, setting the characteristics of street life in global terms. Some of the shortcomings of categorical thinking also apply to the catch-all phrase “children at risk,” although this term has emerged in the literature to usefully broaden the research on how children face adversity. Significantly for the contribution to be made by anthropology, current studies also

increasingly seek to look at the circumstances of children as they themselves perceive them.

Specific directions for future research have been suggested in the literature. These would include moving the prime focus of investigation to the families of the children at large rather than focusing solely on individual children (Raffaelli 1997, p. 96). It would include a culturally sensitive understanding of the risk and protective factors that shape children's lives (Campos et al. 1994) in a more explicit developmental perspective. A greater effort should be made to analyze more convincingly the reasons for variation in the life histories of individual children and to relate differences by age, gender, ethnicity, or social support to the range of structural constraints operating at the macro-level. It is also necessary to be better informed about children's vulnerabilities, capabilities, and resilience, if these concepts are indeed significant for the lives of children. One still knows relatively little about how interventions fostering children's agency and participation can be implemented at ground level and translated into practical benefits for them. What is certainly required is a more sophisticated understanding of children's departure from the streets and long-term career outcomes, rather than the habitual focus of attention on the causes of their arrival or existence on the streets.

This highlights how research with street children can further our understanding of childhood adversity and urban social exclusion. Indeed a measure of the true worth of current academic and applied research is reflected in how our conceptual understandings of children under adversity continue to change. Work with street children significantly contributes to theories of agency and competency and of risk and resilience, the development of effective participatory methods, and the effective advocacy for children's rights. It also informs contemporary research on street ethnography and social exclusion in the context of urban poverty (Mingione 1999, Gigack & van Gelder 2000).

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