

## THE INNER-CITY STREET CHILD: A PROFILE OF THE DILEMMA AND SOME GUIDELINES

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that children are first and foremost persons in need of love and care (Brendtro *et al.* 1998). It is unconscionable that in our cities we have droves of children who beg, live and sleep on the streets. Measures should be adopted to support these children and to reintegrate them into their communities of origin.

Before such measures can be considered, one requires an effective understanding of street children and their unique worlds. To begin with, it is important to stress that street children are not a homogenous group and do not experience the same circumstances. Secondly, the number of South African street children is continuously escalating and is currently estimated at 10 000 children (Levenstein 1996:45). If the number of school youths that wander around the townships, and are consequently potential street children, are added to this, the number would be considerably higher (Smit & Van Schalkwyk 1998:1).

The average age of the street child is 13,5 years (Schurink 1993:19). They wear mostly old baggy clothing, are usually dirty and smelly and often appear to be sleepy and tired. Street children lead essentially *adult lives*, lacking in life-skills despite their abundance of survival skills. They exhibit rapid mood swings, anxiety and distrust of authority figures. As a result they are highly anti-social, with physical, sexual and substance abuse being rife amongst them. This is aggravated by low levels of education and a high prevalence of physical and cognitive disabilities. Although many children express a need for love, with some of them demonstrating fleeting and shallow emotional behaviour, creating the illusion of a true emotional experience, they usually lack the ability to communicate real emotional experiences (Levenstein 1996:46; Silva 1996:281; Smit 1998b:39).

The main motivation for these children to be on the streets is either to generate an income for their families or to escape unbearable home circumstances (Alexandrescu 1996:268; Dallape 1996:286; Le Roux 1996:428-429; Schurink 1993:67-73). Consequently, they are usually abused children who are now sexually active. Girls in particular *protect* themselves by over- and under-accentuation of their sexuality as a means of survival (Smit 1998a:23). Most street children use drugs and alcohol, with thinners and glue being the most prevalent (Alexandrescu 1996:269; Levenstein 1996:46).

Street children identify and conform largely to gang culture and, focusing on present and immediate needs, rely on peer groups to fulfil their needs (Alexandrescu 1996:268; Levenstein 1996:46; Silva 1996:281). Consequently, street children do not conform to the norms of society, but rather to those of their peer group (Smit 1998b:38). These children do, however, enjoy creative activities and music, sometimes seeking adventure. Financially, they believe not only that people who work should provide them with money, but also that they have to earn money because they are on the street. In today's capitalist society, money is the medium for acceptance;

as a result, these children experience varying levels of anxiety should they find themselves without money (Smit 1998a:24).

Street children are usually bored and therefore manipulate available programmes to fit into their *schedules*, according to their needs and interests at that moment. They are streetwise and possess the ability to analyse any situation, utilising it to their personal benefit, manipulating the public, police businesses and workers in projects. They show disrespect towards the police and will avoid programmes to remain in their freedom zones (Smit 1998a:23).

Previous and current attempts at dealing with the problem of street children in South Africa are proving largely ineffective and raise many questions as to how this situation can be rectified (Dallape 1996:288-289). Furthermore, a lack of research, which could serve as a measure for the effectiveness of a specific service, hinders the evaluation of a specific programme, especially with regards to uncertainty of alternative approaches to the street child phenomenon (Smit & Van Schalkwyk 1998:1; Van Beers 1996:200).

This study focused on diagnosing problems experienced by inner city street children in order to aid the development of practical inner-city strategies. Such strategies would be linked to community-based programmes like home schools and other support programmes run by the community members themselves in the communities of origin. Furthermore, this study focused on practical guidelines to accommodate these inner-city street children on a 24-hour basis temporarily and effectively, thereby assisting in crime prevention and the development of strategies to involve them in reintegrative programmes in their communities of origin as soon as possible. As such, communities of origin should be empowered to develop such 24-hour support systems for themselves by themselves. These programmes and strategies must be reality based and cost effective. Furthermore, not only would they begin to address the immediate symptoms or problems of these children, but at the same time would be linked to strategies that would prevent children from going to the city streets. Such strategies would be developmental and educational in nature, addressing the problem in a holistic manner.

With this in mind, the study entailed an analysis of the specific needs of the inner-city street child and the dynamics of this problem, enabling the establishment of a profile of the inner-city street child. An attempt was made to understand the practical problems that businesses, the police, courts and the tourist industry experience with street children, with a view to forming a network with other role players in the city aimed at early identification and intervention. Finally, guidelines assisting management of the problem in a holistic and integrated manner, linked to support programmes in the communities of origin, were developed.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This project was based on the principles of qualitative action research as it aimed at contributing to both the practical concerns of people or recipients in an immediate problematic situation as well as to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable and ethical framework (Huberman & Miles 1994:431). The focus group of the study involved street children under the age of 18 years on the city streets of Cape Town.

Through a process of field experimentation, where verbatim recordings of real incidents were made on a daily basis over a period of four months, an exploratory phase was conducted. Interventions and support systems were observed and recorded, after which focus interviews and further observation were used to verify the findings and implications of the strategies. A specific format was followed, which included a description of the incident, a listing of all involved, strategies utilised, the time and place of the incident, follow-up discussions and any

relevant additional information. In addition to this, individual interviews were conducted and analysis was done of photographs and videos. This cyclic process was repeated until a sufficient understanding of the problems was achieved: *When the data repeats itself, when the researcher has confidence that themes and examples are repeating instead of extending, it may be time to leave the field* (Ely 1991:91).

All recorded information was then transcribed and copies were distributed to each of the seven members of the research team, as well as an independent researcher. Each individual conducted a content analysis independently, after which members of the group shared their interpretations. If consensus was reached concerning the analysis, the interpretation was accepted as valid at the time. Any disagreements or uncertainties were re-evaluated by means of focus group interviews and video analysis. The findings of the independent researcher substantiated those of the research group.

After the initial findings had been made, the process of information gathering was repeated for a further month. During this time no new information emerged, verifying earlier findings. Findings were further substantiated by an extensive literature study, previous research conducted by the research co-ordinator and research efforts abroad.

### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1 On street dynamics

Different groups of people appear on the streets: street families, gangsters, prostitutes and street adults and youth. Each of these groups has its own dynamics, although there is an overlap between them.

Street families usually consist of mothers and their children, are usually nomadic, are steadily increasing in numbers, and may or may not be related to a gang. Families who are gang related will develop within the gangster culture itself. Child minders also bring young children to the streets, where they are used (in both instances) to sensitise the public and influence them to give money, which the mother will usually keep safe for the children. As a result, children are appearing on the streets at younger ages, with their behaviour largely influenced by their street families. Street families often know the street children and will sometimes selectively make information available about them, and vice versa.

Gangsters use street children for their own benefit, supporting them in exchange for criminal and other services. As such, gangsters serve as role models for many street children despite the misuse and manipulation of their services. Children are also absorbed into individual gangster groups at a very young age, where they have to conform and earn their position in the hierarchical structures of gangsters in order to survive. As gangsters enforce territorial areas for groups of street children, children become connected to the different gangster groups. Consequently, gangster conflict results in conflict amongst the children too, creating intimidation and anxiety amongst them.

Although adult prostitutes do not appear to have a significant influence on street children, young girls engage in prostitution to earn money. Within the street youth, young girls often provide sexual favours in exchange for *love*, acceptance and protection on the street.

Street adults tend to interact in a positive manner with street youths. They eat and drink together, sharing food, wine and drugs with each other. They display a concern for the children by, for example, protecting them and sharing parking areas with them, and as a result they have a lot of information on the street children. Street adults do appear to be displaying an increased

tendency towards a gay orientation and as such, demonstrate a need for appropriate support and services.

### 3.2 Community of origin

Street children usually come from poor, developing communities that are usually lacking in resources and services. Violence is often rife in such communities, which have high levels of gangsterism and crime. Substance abuse appears to be widespread, encouraged by availability. These conditions are compounded by low moral standards and a breakdown in family structures. Such factors contribute towards the creation of a depressing context in which there is a general lack of purpose and motivation to take responsibility for any actions. Furthermore, community members not only lack knowledge on how to access services, but they also lack the means of access. Such communities also experience high levels of illiteracy and limited education. A street child's place of origin will also play an important role in whether or not that child will be accepted back into the community.

### 3.3 Family facts

Most street children come out of single-parent families in which problems may occur with new step-parents. Furthermore, children challenge their traditional structures and as a result experience cultural conflicts and identity confusion. Alcohol abuse, unemployment or low income, overcrowding, inconsistent behaviour management and family conflict aggravate parenting problems. Families often send children onto the streets to make money, and so available services remain under-utilised due to ignorance and a depressing context. Consequently, children often experience homes as lacking in care, love and stability, as being abusive and as involving double bind communications.

### 3.4 Educational services

It would appear that street children avoid school due to fear and past failures. Mainstream education does not provide for the needs of high-risk learners and does not provide an after-school programme for them. Furthermore, many teachers are unfamiliar with the real situation of learners in their classes. Lack of communication between schools and social services means that schools become a last lifeline before the child drops out. Such situations are aggravated by a lack of funding, which forces children onto the streets, and an inability on the part of parents to utilise the educational system.

### 3.5 The public

Public response towards street children is varied and diverse. Whilst some accept the situation in which these children find themselves and are supportive, others experience the situation in a negative and frustrating manner, to the extent that violent tendencies may be displayed. On a whole, street children have become part of the social reality of today's public. This reality includes giving money to begging children as a means of *protecting* themselves against a situation about which they lack adequate knowledge and information. The public is furthermore often unaware of projects catering for street children and views these children in terms of labour. Abuse of street children by the public in various ways appears common, as does public dissatisfaction with services available for these children.

### 3.6 Business

Understanding of the problem of street children among businesses is diverse and linked to the urgency of solving the problem - varied views and uninformed responses create an irresponsible and uncoordinated approach to the situation. Such contributory actions are confounded by a

variety of negative attitudes that prevail towards street children projects that have proved ineffective until now. Such negative views extend towards the police and government services. Most businesses want *quick fixes* and feel that a once-off financial contribution will solve the problem. Frustration levels also result in certain businesses acting impulsively in attempts to keep children from their premises. This research has illustrated how children are used by some businesses to sell and support drug usage amongst other street children, to buy and sell stolen goods, or are financially rewarded for sexual activities and child labour.

### 3.7 Security services

There appears to be a general lack of training with regard to dealing with street children. Security guards tend to act single-mindedly in terms of their brief: to clear the streets, no matter what the situation or context. This results in intimidation by and of street children, as well as frustration, anxiety and aggressive behaviour. Such a presence sometimes forces children to look for alternatives and they will then often land up among gangsters in different areas.

### 3.8 Transport

Many *street children* make use of trains to reach the central city area. Children often travel on trains without paying, and it would appear that guards allow them to travel free of charge. Furthermore, children often sleep on trains and find shelter on them for the night. The decrease in the number of children on the streets of the CBD during periods of power failure when trains are not available emphasises the important role the railway system plays in the lives of these children.

### 3.9 Projects and social services

Projects dealing with street children often lack co-ordination and focus. There are no formal criteria for appointing street workers, and a lack of integrated training programmes results in role confusion. Consequently, both staff and street children remain dissatisfied and disillusioned with such programmes. Furthermore, projects lack practical and reliable databases as well as effective monitoring systems with which to work. Workers are also not in touch with the real needs of street children and often lack the skills with which to deal with children in their holistic context. A further shortcoming of many programmes is that they often omit to motivate children to return to their communities of origin due to their dependence on subsidies. As far as their immediate dealings with the children are concerned, many projects only define the *easy to work with* children into their target groups, leaving the real problems on the street. Projects may also isolate various groups and focus only on exclusive age groups.

In addition to the inconsistency with which managers and workers approach street children, they also lack effective co-operation with other projects, the police, the justice system, etc., as well as lacking effective links with the communities in which they work. This lack of co-operation is further hampered through competition between projects for funding and recognition.

Finally, programmes tend to *apply* recent trends to their work, *co-opting* new ideas into their own approaches. Due to limited understanding of the dynamics of the needs of the children, as well as of the trends being applied, programmes do not strengthen their existing product, but rather stick to their old paradigms. This often creates an illusion of progress, but it is in reality stagnation. This is illustrated in the *phases approach*, which effectively excludes children from specific programmes because they *are not ready for that phase*. This situation just confirms that the child is *not good enough* and engenders discouragement and conflict. Lack of co-ordination means that activities do not necessarily co-ordinate with other programmes. It furthermore provides street children with the opportunity to attend programme activities selectively, which

they plan into their schedules and consequently manipulate the programmes. Gangsters often manipulate children in this regard and children will often provide them with food. Furthermore, projects will provide children with money for travelling expenses, but make no effort to monitor how children use the money.

Social services, too, lack co-ordination and effective training, resulting in role confusion. Social workers dealing with street children lack focused job descriptions and experience great work overload. As a result there is a high labour turn-over, which proves disruptive to street children. Social workers lack access to co-ordinated information, proper means of assessment, as well as informal assessment strategies, and are inaccessible. Many social workers adopt an attitude of *we know best*, planning for street children without consulting them.

### 3.10 The police

Direct abuse of street children by the police appears to be quite prevalent. In addition to physical and sexual abuse, children are financially abused in that money is taken from them in return for police connivance at criminal acts committed by these children. Such dysfunctional interactions may be explained by findings that indicate the police are not adequately trained to work with street children, which adds to their high levels of frustration. Ineffective social work services and a lack of follow-up services compound their frustrations. Communication with others involved in projects aimed at street children is also poor and back-up support to such services is often lacking. Flow of communication and information between these two parties is usually confusing and uncoordinated. Results did, however, highlight that there is tolerance and skills for working with street children amongst some police service members.

### 3.11 The justice system

In general there is a greater focus on the formal procedures of the justice system than on the real needs and dynamics of the child and higher needs of the situation. Encounters with the judicial system may prove overwhelming for street children, who seldom experience the support such circumstances may require. Parents are hardly ever even informed of the detention of their children, unless the parents themselves are easily *accessible*. Furthermore, parents and children lack knowledge of projects and resources that are available to them in this regard. Consequently, parents seldom present during assessment procedures or follow-up court appearances. Court proceedings are seldom explained to either the child or the parent. Justice workers, who lack proper training on how to handle interviews and assess a street child, aggravate these circumstances. The use of untrained personnel, especially at night, results in ineffective services. A cultural and language barrier often further complicates the situation and causes confusion in the assessment process. Furthermore, the prescribed format of assessment is usually ill-matched to the reality of the child's situation, and consequently limits the quality of information gleaned by such interviews. There are no follow-up, monitoring or support strategies in place for street children, which contributes to the inefficiency of the database. Finally, newly identified problems are often not referred to social services in order to provide the child and his/her family with support.

Court procedures depend on a specific Commissioner of Child Welfare. Application of these procedures is inconsistent, resulting in confusion amongst probation officers, who also neglect to include the child in any planning processes.

Overall, the system is discouraging and counter-productive for the rehabilitation of children, often recycling children back into their anti-social behaviour patterns through the lack of child-

friendly, secure care facilities and constructive rehabilitation programmes. Uncoordinated efforts to deal with the phenomenon of street children create confusion and ineffective services.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 On street dynamics**

There could be on-street programmes to accommodate the needs and dynamics of all people living on the street. Specialised programmes could be developed for on-street families as well as very young children and their mothers. Children have to learn to respect the law and provision should be made to reach this goal in these programmes. A new city-based infrastructure could also serve as a support system for runaways from shelters, accommodating these children in a pick-up and support strategy based on a 24-hour service model (see Smit & Van Schalkwyk 1998). These services will link up with other community-based infrastructures and services. All programmes should take the dynamics of the different territorial areas into account. These programmes could provide street people with necessary information, specifically with regard to available support services. Strategies for street children should also involve and address the dynamics of gangsters and prostitutes in order to make a really positive impact.

### **4.2 Community of origin**

A community-based street worker linking home schools to social services and mainstream education could be introduced. Such personnel could be residents of the community itself and existing services and resources could be integrated into a holistic structure. Integrated programmes involving parents of high-risk children in the community could also be developed. Furthermore, availability and accessibility of services should be a priority in the communities. Police, mainstream schools, the justice system and the municipality should take note of such services and become partners in the process.

### **4.3 Family facts**

Family support should form an integral part of the holistic approach to the services of street children. Services to the child and parents could be co-ordinated by a co-ordinating body to ensure a holistic support strategy to reintegrate the child, family and community.

### **4.4 Educational services**

Teachers could be trained and sensitised to identify and understand the real needs, dynamics and practical problems of high-risk learners. The development of teacher support teams is also vital to accommodate the problems of education. All school dropouts should be reported immediately to a co-ordinating body, and the problem of gangsterism in schools should be addressed effectively. Parent involvement in education should receive special attention with an emphasis on parents of high-risk children and street children. Financial support enabling parents to send their children to school could be investigated or a no-fee system for families with financial problems could then possibly be installed. Finally, non-formal schooling programmes (community-based home schools for high-risk/street children) should receive official recognition and support as part of the service to learners with special needs.

### **4.5 The public**

The public should be educated about the negative consequences of handing out food, money and clothes directly to street children. A co-ordinating body should be established, which the public should be made aware of and to which they could report every incident with a street child within

24 hours. Members of the public who would like to work with street children could also contact this body (see Smit & Van Schalkwyk 1998).

#### 4.6 Business

Businesses should be provided with a 24-hour support service to which problems experienced with street children could be reported, thus enhancing the possibilities for re-integration of these children into their communities of origin. They could make a contribution to such a service and accept their responsibility as partners in the process. Businesses could educate their customers not to give money to street children, but rather to support co-ordinated programmes, consequently shifting from being part of the problem to being part of the solution. Retailers should also refrain from selling glue and thinners to children.

#### 4.7 Security services

Security guards should be trained as partners in a programme to deal effectively and report problems with street children. Such services could be incorporated into the job description of security guards.

#### 4.8 Transport

Trains and stations should improve security services in order to prohibit free access to trains. Children travelling without train tickets should be reported to a co-ordinating body working with street children. Street workers should be placed on duty at stations in order to identify and report children travelling on trains during school hours and after hours.

#### 4.9 Projects and social services

A co-ordinating body could link and monitor projects and infrastructures in communities. Regular reports and meetings with Social Services (PAWK) could be scheduled by this body in order to gain feed back on the progress and needs of the projects. The main focus of funding should be programmes in the communities of origin, while state funding should only be made available to projects that are part of a holistic and monitored programme. All people who want to start projects for high-risk/street children should report their ideas to this co-ordinating body, which in turn should feed the information back to social services. This will prevent duplication and guarantee constructive co-ordination. Street workers from the different inner-city projects should be withdrawn and be re-co-ordinated as a *separate* service to projects by an independent expert or team of people, linked to community services via full-time social workers. Street workers should also be trained, co-ordinated and supervised to render on-street programmes on an on-going basis, linked to services in the communities. They should all have the same job description, with the exception of a shift of focus where necessary. Restructuring of services and retraining of management and personnel to fit into a holistic community-orientated 24-hour programme should be encouraged. Similarly, placement of street children should be conducted and co-ordinated by the core team that co-ordinates the street workers. On-street work should focus on the whole street community to act in the best interests of street children and to make a significant impact.

Programmes in projects should be permanently research-based to ensure that needs and dynamics are addressed as development takes place. The co-ordinating body should monitor and report back to social services on a regular basis. As an integral holistic programme, the police, the justice system, businesses and municipalities should be included as partners in the process. Furthermore, identified role players from the state departments and business and local authorities could meet with the co-ordinating body on a quarterly basis to monitor, plan and evaluate

available services. A co-ordinating body could be enabled to take full responsibility for developing a database as part of the holistic programme. Most projects should make a paradigm shift to change their strategies to address the real dynamics and needs of the street children in a holistic way. Full-time social workers should be an inherent part of this process and all staff should undergo specialised, on-going training and supervision. The development of projects and infrastructures should be based on the real needs and dynamics of the specific context with the focus of all services being the development of a stable and trusting relationship.

#### **4.10 The police**

Police should be trained to work effectively with street children on the street, at the police station and during court procedures. Police should be encouraged to report all problems encountered with street children to a co-ordinating body. Every police station should have a unit to deal with the problems related to youth and street children.

#### **4.11 The justice system**

The 24-hour service body could be contacted before any child is assessed. No street child should be assessed without the presence and support of his/her street worker, social worker or parents. Assessment workers should be efficiently trained in the handling and interviewing of street children, as well as in the use of the 24-hour service model for assessment workers. Finally, a child should only be released into the custody of a guardian or trained adult responsible for the child.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

Individual projects should not have street workers, but a group of well-trained street workers should work in specific areas, co-ordinated by a trained team of people or an expert in the field. This co-ordinator or team should be in contact with different projects in the area, and must have a sound knowledge of services offered as well as positive outcomes of programmes in order to refer children to programmes via the street workers and social workers. There should be a co-ordinating body to take responsibility for all street programmes. There could be a street worker for every 4 business blocks in the inner-city. A social worker in-turn could co-ordinate every four street workers, who in turn have links to services in the communities where the children come from. A telephone service line could be established to assist children in need of care, the public and the police on a 24-hour basis. Furthermore, a 24-hour assessment service should be established in order to assist children in need of care. Community-based street workers and home schools, linked to day-care facilities in the community, could be formed. The development of community-based programmes, co-ordinated and linked to inner-city, on-street programmes to facilitate real community integration could be encouraged. A monitoring and database system should be established.

These recommendations are correlated with those based on international research (Levenstein 1996) and require further consideration and investigation. A joint co-operation system between the police and a street work team in working with street children on the street, and picking up children (0-18 years), which could be explained to children, is recommended. If children are on the streets during school hours or after midnight, they will be picked up and taken to a community-based assessment centre or overnight facility. Their parents and the school from which the child comes should be contacted. Practical problems like contacting the parents, wrong addresses, etc. could be seen as part of the development process in developing strategies to deal with all the possible complex problems. This strategy should be seen as the first step towards contacting and involving the parents, the school and the community. It is most certainly

the first positive step in the process of reintegration into the family, school and community contexts. It also has a strong preventative element. The rationale for this strategy is derived from the process in Santiago, Chile, and serves to protect the child, prevent the child from getting involved in criminal and other destructive activities, and deal with children who are involved in criminal activities in a constructive manner. Not attending to the real needs and situations of these children can, from a psychological and educational point of view, become a form of abuse itself (Smit 1999). Consequently, creative ways of dealing with the situation should be developed and researched.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Department of Health: Social Services, Western Cape, which made this research possible.

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