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Saving the street children

Every day millions of children live—and many die—in the streets of the world's cities. Sadly, no nation is spared this shame of shames

By Scott Pemberton

They're known as "children of the dust"—*bui doi*—in Vietnam or, perhaps more accurately, "the dust of life." In Bangladesh, they are *tokai*—"rag pickers." In Guatemala, they are *huelepegas*, or "glue sniffers."

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In nearly every urban area in nearly every nation, they are simply "street children," defined not by who they are but by where they work and live.

By day they are true to their Guatemalan nickname, sniffing glue or other "feel-good" inhalants. By night they sleep in abandoned buildings, sewers, or makeshift shelters on sidewalks. They suffer beatings. Or worse. The attacks, which are a constant threat, can come from anywhere, even from among the police and other street children.

"These children eke out a living by begging, washing cars, selling candy and gum, carrying groceries, shining shoes," says Kenneth D. MacHarg, formerly a representative of the Latin American Mission, a faith-based relief agency. But often, he continues, they inhabit "a much darker world of prostitution, drugs, or violence."

For such children, "The street more than their family has become their real home," says Jo Becker, children's rights advocacy director for **Human Rights Watch** (HRW), which actively monitors conditions worldwide. They "might not necessarily be homeless or without families," Becker explains, but they "live in situations where there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults."

How many are there? Estimates run as high as 150 million—a figure equivalent to one-half of the United States population. A more generally agreed-upon number is 100 million or fewer Accurate worldwide totals are difficult to obtain because the methods of finding, identifying, and counting the children vary. Individual city counts are considered more reliable by researchers.

In Accra, Ghana, the number nearly doubled from 10,400 in 1996 to 19,165 in 2002, according to the Catholic Action for Street Children (CAS), or about 1 percent of Accra's 2 million residents. Today the agency estimates there are some 21,000

street children in Accra, including 7,500 “street mothers” under age 20 who have borne second-generation street babies.

Though challenging the souls of even the most affluent nations, street children are understandably more prevalent in developing countries. Family dysfunction, often the result of extreme poverty or the death of one or both parents, creates living conditions that put them on their own sooner and in greater numbers than in wealthier countries. In developed nations, such children are more likely to be part of homeless families.

Why are there so many in so many places? How do they come to spend their days—and often their nights—in the streets?

“Violence is at the root of many children seeking shelter in the streets,” MacHarg says.

Alfredo Mora, the Latin American director of another relief organization, Viva Network, estimates that “6 million children and adolescents are subjected to physical violence each year in Latin America.”

In Accra, 86 percent of street children are escaping “family strife,” reports CAS. Even with one or both parents, deep poverty can force the children to work in the streets just to eat and sometimes to help support the families they do have.

War or disease—especially in Africa, HIV/AIDS—leaves them not only without parents but also without grandparents or other adult family members. In sub-Saharan Africa, the epidemic has orphaned more than *12 million* children, according to *The State of the World’s Children 2006*, an extensive report produced by **UNICEF**.

Severely complicating the issue is that “the public view in many countries is overwhelmingly negative,” says HRW’s Becker. “There is an alarming tendency … to view street children as almost sub-human.”

In fact, that’s how one Egyptian girl, Nevine, described her feelings. “The way people look at me makes me feel that I am not human,” she says. Nevine took to the streets at 14 to track down her runaway father. “That I am torn and they are neat.”

Says Adel, a boy who ran away at age 9: “My father always came home in a bad mood and would hit me with anything that came to hand. I couldn’t take it any more.”

Once reunited with her father, Nevine was abruptly returned to uncles who punished her with beatings and burns. Soon, she traded one impossible life for another and now calls the streets home. To date, her rewards have been more beatings, rapes, and the murder of her 6-month-old baby, a second-generation street child.

Nevine and Adel both live in Cairo. Their stories are known, though not their real names, because of on-site outreach by UNICEF, which assists with education, job training, and health issues. In truth, they could be living in nearly any urban area

anywhere in the world.

“Girls are the ones that ‘drug up’ the most, and they are the hardest to reach because they have been hardened,” says Margaret Roberts, who works with street children in Mexico City. “They told me once that no girl has been on the street for more than two weeks” before being sexually assaulted.

As the “dust of life,” street children are swept along by societies that often wish they could simply sweep them away—and sometimes do.

“They are frequently detained arbitrarily by police simply because they are homeless, or criminally charged with vague offenses such as loitering, vagrancy, or petty theft,” report E. M. Salem and F. Abd El-Latif in a study of 100 street children in Alexandria, Egypt. In addition, of the children who had been arrested, nearly 75 percent reported “police maltreatment.” This finding is supported by World Health Organization research indicating such children can be beaten, tortured, and even murdered while in police custody. Detentions can last for weeks.

With its focus on developing nations, UNICEF has identified three types of street children. They are those who are:

- *On* the street: The largest group, these children work in the streets. They might be in touch with their families, but essentially they have broken away.
- *Of* the street: Runaways, abused or otherwise alienated, these children come from deprived and poverty-stricken families who do not maintain normal family units.
- *In* the street: The smallest group, these children are truly orphaned or abandoned. Their parents have died in war or from illness or can simply no longer look after them.

What are these kids like?

Forget the smiling, well-scrubbed faces in photos you sometimes see in magazines and other media. Such children do exist, of course, the result of the tireless efforts of social service workers who find in these children their life’s work. But, unfortunately, they are not the norm.

Picture them instead as underfed and undersized with mud-caked faces, tangled hair, foul mouths, and angry hearts. They survive largely through menial labor, theft, and violence. “All the street children manifested aggressive and violent behavior,” reported Salem and El-Latif, “either to the surrounding environment, fighting with other people, aggressiveness toward other people’s possessions, and starting fires.”

They are generally boys, and to a lesser extent girls, ages 3 to 18, who take to the streets to earn money for themselves and often their families—by whatever means possible. Sometimes they steal or beg. Sometimes they work long hours for employers who ignore their age. Sometimes they prostitute themselves.

Increasingly, however, because of the imaginative and persistent efforts of not-for-profit private, government, and faith-based agencies, they are learning to support themselves as entrepreneurs running micro-businesses.

“See how hard I’ve been working,” says Santosh, holding out his calloused hands.

A 19-year-old Nepali, whose street life began at age 7, Santosh completed the Street Business Toolkit course provided by Toronto-based Street Kids International. Each month he creates and sells 25 to 30 recycled-paper picture frames and boxes for a dollar each. This regular income enables him to live *off* the street in shared accommodations.

His newfound business experience has affected him in other ways too. From the beginning, he has donated 20 percent of his profit to youth programs so others can follow his path.

“It’s my business strategy,” he says. “We use paper that is good for the environment, and a portion of our profits go back to the kids. This is good for business.”

Street Kids International’s approach to working in developing countries, explains executive director David Pell, “focuses on building the capacity of local and regional workers to be able to more effectively deliver services and help local youth on a path out of poverty.”

Even wider recognition for this kind of self-assistance seems at hand. The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was shared by Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank, which he founded in Bangladesh. The “village bank,” as it’s known, addresses directly a major reason street children exist: They come from fatherless households with mothers who cannot support them.

Each year, women receive 95 percent of the bank’s $800 million in micro-loans to create and build small businesses. “For women to be granted the loan has a definite effect on the family,” Yunus says. “Children benefit automatically, with better clothes and food.”

Averaging $100, these loans also promote the “it takes a village to raise a child” concept, because they go to self-organized groups, usually numbering about five women. The women meet regularly to help one another solve business problems. Programs like the Street Business Toolkit Santosh used multiply the effects as well. The women also “undertake to work for food production, pure drinking water, hygiene, health, family planning, economy, discipline, community and motivation in the group and in their families,” noted Ole Danbolt Mjøs, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, in awarding the prize.

Such groups network with other groups and, Mjøs says, they have “recently been the point of departure for vaccinations and health problems.” The Bangladesh government itself, in fact, announced plans in March to vaccinate 24 million children (not just street children) against polio after the disease’s resurgence in neighboring India.

This kind of community building may turn out to be an especially important way to help street children, suggests the Alexandria study. Improving the capabilities of single mothers to support their families economically and to monitor their children’s health was a key recommendation from Salem and El-Latif.

Street children face myriad health issues. By percentage, the Alexandria children suffered from the following conditions or diseases: tapeworm (98 percent), parasitic infestation (92 percent), malnutrition (83 percent), anemia (78 percent), scabies (66 percent), lice (48 percent), hepatitis (21 percent), fungal infections (20 percent), and tuberculosis symptoms (16 percent). Though not measured, HIV/AIDS is a threat: 92 percent of the children reported being sexually active, with 71 percent reporting abuse at the hands of adults, including family members, or other street children, the report notes.

These conditions result, researchers say, because the children wash and bathe in canals and drainage ditches; eat “anything available,” often by “sorting through the food waste of hotels and restaurants”; and suffer more from air pollution because “malnutrition and substance abuse” diminish the resistance of their respiratory systems.

All of the children studied were “addicted” to some substance, notes the Alexandria report. Glue is perhaps the most common agent because it’s available, cheap, legal, and portable. But like kids anywhere they can be creative—for example, they also burn cockroaches and inhale the fumes.

Such research coupled with the efforts of nongovernmental organizations is leading to positive action by some governments. In early 2006, officials representing Alexandria, the Arab Urban Development Institute, and UNICEF signed the first agreement to protect “children at risk” in Alexandria. In Caracas, Venezuela, the municipal government funded, staffed, and allocated trailers around the city to feed, clothe, and bathe street children, reports Greg Burch, formerly director of the relief group *Niños de la Luz*, or “Children of the Light.” The trailers serve about 25 children each day.

Most street children are undereducated or illiterate (76 percent in the Alexandria study). So, in addition to reduced poverty and improved health, education and job training are essential components to solving a complex and stubborn problem.

Such efforts can make a difference, one child at a time.

Ten-year-old Magin, for example, was turned out of his home when his father died. After Magin spent two years on the streets in Accra, a CAS field worker invited him into a multi-step program to educate, socialize, and employ street children.

Success in basic education led him to CAS-sponsored auto mechanic training at age 15. Now, the 22-year-old Magin works 10 hours each day repairing cars for good wages, no longer swept aside as the “dust of life.”