



## **A longitudinal study on the phenomenon of street children and their likelihoods to join juvenile gangs upon transient from the adolescence**

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### **Abstract**

This research aimed at to investigate the lived experiences of the street children in Colombo, Sri Lanka, although street children can be found in several other towns as well and the perspectives may vary regionally. The main purpose of the study was to portray the diversified responses of the street children's experiences through a longitudinal study. Also envisioned to come up with predictable views on their life style characterized in accordance with their socio-economic, religious and cultural occurrences.

In most cases the responsible agencies, such as government institutions and non-government agencies are to define distinctiveness of the street children. But this study wanted to get directly examine the current life styles of street children, their future and the tendencies to join criminal gangs.

This research was initiated in 2005 in Colombo and concluded in 2015 in three phases. The two initial phases which were concluded in 2010 were directly focused on street children while phase three implemented from 2011 – 2015 was straightforwardly concentrated on Youth gangs enclosing 631 ganged youth in mixed ages and 491 of those in age from 18 to 32 years.

The theoretical methodology of the study is guided by an affirmative research paradigm. In Phase 1, 20 semi structural interviews (SSIs) and the key informants were the parents or guardians of the street children. All interviewee samples were identified through snow-ball technique and a random samples. The total children selected for research were 256 and 190 male children representing 76% of the total.

Research carried out from 2011 to 2015 on urban ganged youth from age between 18 – 32 to determine the relationship that existed between gang members and the youth who passed childhood as street children. Studying the jeopardy of street children joining criminal gangs when they grow up too, became essential in the study.

**Keywords:** street children, longitudinal study, juvenile, gangs, adolescence

### **1. Introduction**

Although the term street children is neither a precise, nor very useful classification for children “on” or “of” the street, the term does serve as a point of engagement in considering the variety of issues and problems facing far too many vulnerable children in urban centers throughout the World. In this paper, the term of street children used to address children who might transit to the streets.

Foremost themes used in many descriptions on street children include homelessness, separation from families, and being out of school, but often those children designated as street children do not possess all these traits. Further set of characteristics include poverty and child workers. In turn, these are linked to the vulnerability of exploitation of labor and the risk of contradiction with the law. The circumstances of street children overlap with several other categories of children, such as trafficking children, migrant children, and working children. Also, there are series of problems and difficulties confronted by children, including endemic poverty, domestic harassments or sexual abuse and hazardous working environments, exploitative labor, substance abuse, conflict with the law and juvenile justice, and specially the HIV/AIDS pandemics. The global population of street

children has been variously estimated to range from tens of millions to 100 million with numbers rising proportion living in South Asia <sup>[1-3]</sup>. In 2006, the estimated number of street children in Sri Lanka was 15,000 <sup>[4]</sup>. Majority of them live in the Colombo city,

### **Definition of the Street Children in Asia**

“Street children” can be characterized as one sub-set of the orphan populace, which also includes abandoned children, foster children, and runaways. What distinguishes “street children” is their characteristic engagement in “street life,” including menial jobs, begging, gangs, and sleeping in alleyways and trees. In many developing countries, they comprise most of the orphan population. Their existence represents both a cause and input of national underdevelopment; the street is their home and source of livelihood and thus local economies and street children rely on each other for sustenance. Because they mostly dwell in urban areas, they must contend for resources in an already competitive context. This context puts their skills of survival, negotiation, relationship, and life management under pressure. They grow up only with the support of each other, in largely unpredictable situations.

## 2. Research Problem

*Growing trends of propensities for street children to unify with Youth gangs after adolescence is the problem focused in this research.*

## 3. Objectives of the study

To study the vulnerability of current life style of street children and the tendency of the street children to be members of youth gangs in future.

In this study an in-depth assessment has been accomplished to analyze the consequences that paves the way for street children to originate youth gangs also revealing the status of socio-economic, religious and cultural surroundings while also identifying their daily involvements and how they fashion out their living modalities.

## 4. Methodology

This research was a longitudinal and qualitative, cross-sectional study (in three phases) carried out in Colombo City. In this research, we defined street children as children was used for profiling. All interviewers had prior experience in studies/programmes involving street children, and therefore maintaining good rapport with participants was possible. SSIs and FGDs were tape recorded with consent of participants whenever possible, and notes were taken down. Tapes were transcribed and notes expanded immediately after each SSI and FGD. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Researcher observed children's behavior using a pre-piloted behavior checklist and these data were used to validate information that emerged from SSIs and FGDs.

The second Stage of the research commenced from 2008 to 2011, was mainly focused on the preparation of case studies to collect more justifiable facts such as; how they change positively by facing counseling techniques. 40 members were selected as a Sample.

Living in streets habitually regardless of whether they still maintained some contact with their families or not. In the first stage of Phase I of the research attended from 2005 to 2008, the researcher conducted twenty semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with key informants (KIs – including parents/guardians of street children, street vendors/ persons working in boutiques in areas frequented by street children, and social workers/researchers who have experience on street children). They were identified through prior knowledge. In Phase II, Researcher recruited street children for research using referral sampling. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with recruited children until no new information was forthcoming (ten FGDs, each with 8-10 children, aged 8- We also conducted SSIs with 25 children, selected to represent their variability in age, sex, ethnic group and religious group. In Phase III, we profiled all recruited children using variables generated through SSIs and FGDs

Researcher used two pre-piloted, interviewer-administered, and semi-structured questionnaires to conduct SSIs with KIs and street children. A pre-piloted, moderator's question guide was used to moderate FGDs. An interviewer-administered questionnaire.

In the Third Stage of the research from 2011 to 2015, Researcher undertook detailed research on Urban male Youth

gangs in Colombo city and endeavored studies to comprehend the secreted behavior pattern between Street children and the Youth gang members. This research was planned to perform in several phases. In the Phase I, more emphasis was given to bring together required field data and information through a questionnaire. When the overall achievement is concerned, sufficient data collection was possible in 14 GN divisions. Altogether, 631 youth were interviewed of which 491 youth were in the ages between 18 - 32 years which is the age range followed on youth in the research. In Phase II Over and above, the informal approaches practiced such as casual interviews, observatory information sharing, and small group interviews, planned under this step played a facilitative role in the successful completion of the research.

During this period building an information network too, was possible with the representation of Youth gangs, Security sections, Road dwelling communities, GOs and NGOs etc. Similarly, several Case studies of children attributed by gang leaders and also the children holding membership in gangs too, were prepared. Contents of these studies are composited by an in-depth study attended on particular socio-economical and politically driven factors that forced these children to reach where they are now, and the family backgrounds, education, associates, liked groups etc.,

In-depth discussions are one other tools which is applied on varied topics and continued with the assistance of gang leaders, gang members, shop owners, road side dwellers as well as the security personnel. Recording life histories is another technique used in this study to generate more information relating to the central theme. Some life histories provide a profile of the ganging.

## Data analysis-Survey Method

Once the data collected from each participant of the questionnaire, the same data were entered in to the new data base system for analysis. The System stores the data entered in the Database for future use and data sorting and analyzing techniques have programmed in the system to get different analysis and thus reports as per the objectives of the research. This system has developed using Microsoft Visual Studio 2010 and Microsoft SQL server Management Studio 2008. The software interface and its functionalities are developed using C# programming language. It is a simple and modern, but object oriented programming language which has being developed by Microsoft.

The system database built using slandered SQL (Structured Query Language) with support of Visual Studio - entity framework 4.0

## Sample Size

This research is a descriptive Cross-sectional study. All interviewee samples in the study area were identified through snow-ball technique and a random sample as well as through observations. According to this, analyzed data from 75 gangs within the selected 14 GN divisions. These GN divisions are; *Fort, Pettah, Mattakkuliya, Modera, Blumendhal, Kotahena, New Bazar, Grandpass, Maligawatta, Kochchikade, Suduwella, Keselwatta, Panchikawatta and Maligakanda. Were enrolled.*

**Survey System**

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**Literature review and collection of secondary data**

Theoretical knowledge in the field of Street Children was accumulated through basic literature review (mainly books, research publications, journal article and official records). In the context of Sri Lanka, studies done on street children and youth gangs or gang delinquency or else on Sri Lankan social setting are extremely unobtainable. Although this topic has been taken for varied scales of discussions those are not aimed at studies on gangs or gang delinquency. Even if there are certain studies available those are not followed research modalities. Even though, certain studies had focused on socio cultural features of urban communities or there is pursuance on geographical locations, it is hardly to find elaborative studies done on particular social groups. Yet, diverse reports carrying details of organized criminal gangs that are in possession of Dept. of Police could be referred. In addition, substantial number of studies accomplished in reference to professional researches done in different countries could be pursuit.

Religious prostitution is known by different names such as venkatasani, jogini, nailis, muralis and theradiyan. Ahmedullah Mia (1990) 6 in his study highlighted the problems of street and working children in Bangladesh. He says that in 1990 there were 1.8 million children in the age group of 15-18 years, and it would increase to three million by the year 2000 constituting sixty-four per cent of the urban poor. The Bangladesh Government has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children, and has adopted a 'National Plan of Action Addressed to Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances.' The Underprivileged Children's Education Programme (UCEP) runs special schools providing

formal education and vocational training for 3 Bahni, (1989), Prostitution with religious sanction: The devadasi problem, enkatasani, Jagnini and the Basavi cult, New Delhi: Joint Women's Project. 4 Marglin, F.A. (1985), Purity and auspiciousness in Indian Society, International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology (43), Leiden. E. J. Brill. 5 Mowli, V.C. (1992) "Jogin": Girl child labour studies, New Delhi: Sterling Publications Private Ltd. 6 Ibid 34 children. He stressed the need to develop a link between schools of social work and the NGO network.

Much classic children's literature uses orphans as protagonists. Social scientists too have had a long-standing fascination with orphans, and have engendered specific names and definitions for related child communities. "Orphans," largely speaking, are children who live in the absence of both parents, and have also been defined as children who have lost at least one parent to death (UNICEF, 2002, 25).

**5. Results and Discussions**

The two selected locations in Colombo for the study of street children were Pettah and Fort. These two sites were identified as the most busiest places out of 15 divisions and also being the divisions with highest number of migrant population.

The number of Street children identified for the study from 2005 to 2008 in Colombo were as follows.;

- a) Colombo Fort - 71
- b) Pettah - 185 = Total =256

Researcher deliberated on the key characteristics of 256 Street children after the assessment of ethnicity, family linkages, gender status and the deviant behavior which are key elements to influence adolescents to intersect with youth gangs.

Ethnic relationship: When the ethnic differences are concerned, the study team pursued data gathering and to assess the volume of their partaking to assist policy makers, gang leaders and the arents or guardians of street children. The data gathered revealed that Tamil/Hindu and the Muslim children represents somewhat higher representation as shown in the Table-1. below.

**Table 1:** Ethnic Vs. Religious composition of selected street children = (n 256).

Ser, Nos.	Ethnic and religious composition of sel. Sample	Female	Male	%
1.	Sinhala	28	60	35%
2.	Tamil / Hindu	22	54	29.6
3.	Muslim	12	49	24%
4.	Other	10	21	12%
	Total	72	184	100%

**5.1 Gender condition**

It has been hypothesized that, both girls and boys in streets indicate that disintegration of their family units and the societal victimization are the key reasons for them to find their living in streets. As shown through the research girls left home primarily as a result of alcoholism or violence, and the girls had fewer resources and coping skills when compared with their male counterparts. The girls in our study were more likely

to be double orphans and were less likely to have schooling to fall back on or to join street social networks. Our female participants reported less daily income compared with boys, As per the gender differences were considered 190 were male children out of the total 256 which represented 76.56% of male children.

Following table shows the male and female composition of 256 street children based on the age categories.

**Table 2:** Gender based Age categories of selected sample ( n ) = 256.

Age categories	Female	Male	Total
8>	41	36	77
9-10	13	33	46
11-12	07	21	28
13-14	03	29	32
15-16	01	41	42
17-18	01	30	31
Total	66	190	256

**5.2 Deviant Behavior of Street Children**

Street children are subjected to physical assault, sexual abuse, harassment from the public, intimidation by gang members and criminals, and arrest by the police. This victimization frequently repeats what has occurred in the home. Male street youth by no means have an easy lifestyle, experiencing significantly increased interaction with legal authorities and the detention system. However, the responses of the boys in our

study supported the ideas that their self motivation towards alcoholism, drug trafficking and involving in criminal activities happened with or without linkage with gang youth. Street children in Colombo city exist in a hidden social interface with complex risk factors and engage in risk behaviour that endangers themselves and society. Appropriate policies, policy tools and strategies which would involve multiple stakeholders, need to be introduced to minimise such threats.

**Table 3:** Varied degrees of involvement in Drugs and Alcohol by street Children.

Consciousness on Heroin			Consciousness on Cannabis		
• 154 children in age from 08 to 18			• 154 children in age from 08 to 18		
* Consume Heroin	97	63%	* Consume Ganja	133	87%
* Have seen -do-	22	14%	* Not aware of	10	6%
* Have heard -do-	35	23%	* Un answered	11	7%
* Not aware of	00	00%	* Not aware of	00	00%
Total	154	100%	Total	154	100%

**5.3 Social security of street children**

The research outcomes revealed in the latter part of 2008 and in subsequent phases that slightly beyond 50% of street children do not entitled for protection of parents or close

relatives as shown in Table -4. Similarly the daily routine of children shown in Table 5 reflects the vulnerability of their living pattern.

**Table 4:** Street Children were guarded by parents / guardians or others (n) = 256.

Guarded by /Cared by or Protected by	No. of children	Percentage
* Under the precaution of parents (n)	14	5.4%
* Cared by mother only (n)	58	22.6%
* Cared by father only	24	9.4%
* Cared by mistress or the second husband (n)	16	6.5%
* Guarded by grandparents (n)	28	10.9%
* Protected by Uncle, Aunty (n)	36	16.2%
* Guarded by a neighbor (n)	21	8.5%
* Without anyone’s care or protection (n)	47	18.6%
* Other ways (n)	12	1.9%
Total	256	100%

**Table 5:** Daily routine of street children in streets.

Activity involved	Number	Percentage
Begging	(n) 76	29.6%
Labour work	(n) 55	21.5%
Sales	(n) 102	39.8%
Other	(n) 19	7.4%
Not responded	(n) 4	1.6%
Total	256	100%

**Specific Complexities**

Gang youth are exposed to certain complexities of social milieus of fishing communities, middle class family settings, war affected personnel, and those were freed after imprisonment and the criminals moving confidentially having

escaped from the police custody. Therefore ganged youth pursue massive socio-economic and cultural complexities in comparison to youth in the main society. When the surrounding factor of Colombo city is concerned it provided a extensive privileges for Gangs. Some of the gang members are born in Colombo while others have become residents in Colombo owing to their family settings.

**6. Conclusion**

This report has provided an insight into some of the lived experiences of the street children in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The first section of the interviews results presented the experiences of the 256 street children in Colombo and how these children perceived themselves. Researcher had tried to present required

data based information on street life of children and adolescents in streets in Colombo mainly to highlight the risk of the living patterns and very specifically, the likely connectivity with Youth gangs.

Also the researcher had tried to use different theories to explain the theme. Applying altitudinal fact finding method, applied –labeling theory and to express research methodology adopted in line with several Sociologist worked on similar themes enabling subsequent researchers to understand the phenomenon of street children, changes in their adolescents and the end point of joining a gang member. Researcher did not mention about poverty. Perhaps one will assume it is the main cause of the street children. Poverty can be mentioned indirectly, when researcher describe the failure of the family in Tanzania, which cause of the economic reasons. The last section was about the possible social work intervention. Here researcher applied interactions approach, which researcher think it would be appropriate because the phenomenology-philosophical movement applied in this study and also because of the interview findings call for this approach to find a good and effective social work intervention.

In conclusion the situation of the street children in Colombo is not of a great different from any other country. The most import message should be that the street children are individuals and not homogenous groups. Therefore it is very important to treat them individually, case by case, family by family and they deserve respect and honor, just like many other children.

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