

Choosing the street during crisis

Bridget Steffen with Zephania Owino

Children often choose the streets during crises and then remain trapped there.

Recent research¹ has revealed that a significant number of children joined the streets in Rift Valley Province in Kenya after the brutal violence that followed the 2007 elections in Kenya, many of whom still remain on the streets. In 2011 37% of all interviewed children connected to the streets were IDPs as a result of the post-election violence (64% in deeply scarred Naivasha).

These IDP children identified a number of factors that led them to join the streets: separation from their family caused by displacement; death or injury of family members; withdrawal of humanitarian aid; food insecurity due to loss of livelihoods or inability to rebuild livelihoods due to rushed resettlement programmes.



Still taken from a film shot by children connected to the street in Nakuru who wanted to document their life on the streets.

The single biggest reason that children join the streets is food insecurity (59%). This hidden emergency has been caused by displacement and loss of livelihoods after the violence, but also by drought, and the increasing cost of staple foods and fuel.

While exploitation and violence towards the children is frequent, not all children perceive their street existence as wholly negative. For some it is a liberating experience to socialise, be independent or help support their family. Many children choose the streets to earn money by selling scrap metal and other recyclables, doing odd jobs, begging or offering sex, and receive food directly from street feeding programmes or by scavenging.

Children organise themselves into strong sub-cultures that build group identities and provide protection in the streets. Most join 'bases' – a structured system of gangs which control specific territories in towns and have strong internal hierarchies and codes of behaviour. Girls are often less visible or exist on the streets' peripheries: in markets, working in bars and clubs at night as sex workers or exchanging sex for food during school lunch breaks.

The public can be brutal and intolerant towards children connected with the streets, seeing them first as

criminals, not children. Such stigma makes it difficult for some children to imagine going home or ever re-joining mainstream society. Their greatest fear is being picked up by the police and municipal authorities, who conduct regular violent round-ups of children, and children's consequent 'voluntary' invisibility means that many do not access health care at all. Most drop out of school, and initiatives to re-integrate them are scarce. Children change as they grow up exposed to the streets and become progressively less able to reintegrate into formal schooling, with the challenge compounded where children are addicted to sniffing glue. Ironically, while they have shed the identity of a child, they are living in a state of extended limbo unable to 'grow up', to achieve the indicators of adulthood in Kenya – getting married, joining the workforce, and building a family and home.

Among our recommendations are the need to:

- ensure proper planning of humanitarian responses recognising children's specific needs (prevention of separation, rapid reunification, etc)
- conduct responsible withdrawal of aid
- make existing services accessible, including: health; education and training; children's department services and birth/ID registration; police child protection units
- develop programmes that tackle the root causes not the symptoms of the issue, including providing flexible, alternative education and training, and targeted livelihoods support to vulnerable families
- provide protective spaces for children connected to the streets through drop-in centres and outreach programmes combined with play and emotional support
- engage street 'base' structures and children directly
- hold government departments legally accountable to child protection legislation and obligations.

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Full research findings available from s.hildrew@scuk.or.ke or (from end August) at <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/content/library>

1. Conducted across five towns in Rift Valley Province in 2011, supported by UNICEF and carried out by Save the Children under the auspices of the National Protection Working Group on IDPs, during which 2,404 children connected to the streets were profiled.