

# STREET CHILDREN'S STORIES OF ESCAPING TO, AND SURVIVING ON, THE STREET – “SLUMDOG” LIFE AND “MILLIONAIRE” ENDING?

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## INTRODUCTION

Most movie enthusiasts were intrigued by the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. This story reflects, amongst other issues, the survival strategies of kids living on the streets in towns in India and the happy ending for one of them. The findings of the research on which this article was based could likewise have been dramatised into a script with similar story lines. It would reflect stories of kids trying to escape deprivation and violence and getting caught up in drugs and criminal activities. The authors of such a script could, however, argue that the researchers' interpretation of the findings would not substantiate any story with a “millionaire” ending. Nevertheless, according to the perspectives of research participants, street life could indeed be likened to a “millionaire's life”, compared to their home circumstances.

The discussion that follows clarifies and substantiates this introductory statement. The rationale for, and the goal of the study, are presented, followed by a summary of the research methodology. The article then reports core findings in an inductive, narrative style and concludes with a summary and certain recommendations. Relevant literature is compared to the findings of the study.

## CONTEXT AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

According to the Department of Labour (2002), street children comprise two groups, namely children of the street and children on the street. Children of the street are those children who live on the street and who have no functional family support. Children on the street “work” there and return home at night. What they seem to have in common, according to Baker (1999), is that they perceived the street to be financially more lucrative than the home or a shelter.

The need to listen to the stories from street children arose from the increasing numbers of youths who move to the streets and who are then repeatedly in conflict with the law. In the Western Cape this is also reflected in the increasing demand for more space for youths to be detained, especially males between the ages 14-18 years, as reported by various Places of Safety (Institute Administration System, 2005).

The question to be answered by the research for this article was: “How do participants in this research construct their experiences of getting to the streets, and their subsequent survival on the street?” The goal of the research was thus to qualitatively explore the perceptions and experiences of street children surrounding getting to the street, living on the street and survival on the street.

A qualitative research approach was selected for the research because this was an inquiry process that explored a social or human problem in a natural setting. The researcher gathered perceptions and experiences by methods of story-telling; analysed words and narratives and reported detailed views of informants (Creswell, 1998:15).

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“Life” stories, and more specifically narratives as stories, were selected as strategy of inquiry in order to obtain a free flow of information about getting onto the streets and surviving on the street. According to Roberts (2002:116-117), narratives as stories refer to narrative inquiries that draw together diverse events, happenings and actions, as told by participants, into thematically unified, goal-directed processes.

A sample of ten participants were purposefully selected from the population of street children of selected welfare organisations in the Northern suburbs of the Western Cape, based on their availability to participate voluntarily. The inclusion criteria were that they should be younger than 18 years and have lived on the street for a minimum of one year. Only seven eventually participated, six males and one female. The participants were street children from the greater Cape Town area. Six were coloured, Afrikaans speaking and one was a black, Xhosa-speaking male who was fluent in Afrikaans. Interviews were conducted in Afrikaans. All participants had been involved in several criminal offences, had been detained at children’s homes or a correctional facility and were at some time involved in the No Limits Programme for Street Children. (See also demographic profile under discussion of findings.)

Two broad question themes guided the story telling of participants. The first question explored participants’ experiences of going onto the streets (the beginning of the story). The second theme was about their survival on the street and explored the unfolding of the story of a life on the street. Probing questions helped the participants to tell their stories in a logical and coherent way and explored all factors that relate to these broad issues. Eventually their experiences could be “chronicled in terms of a series of events, happenings and influences” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996:68). A child who lived “on” the street and who was detained at a Place of Safety volunteered to take part in the pilot interview. The setting of the No Limits Programme for Street Children was chosen for the research interviews.

A thematic data analysis of the participants’ stories was undertaken to extract central storylines, based on guidelines by Roberts (2002) and Creswell (1998). This involved the following phases and steps:

- Reading through all transcripts in order to get a sense of the whole;
- Jotting down first impressions/ideas/concepts in the margin of the text;
- Organising the data by means of coding and sorting the images into themes and sub-themes of a chronicle;
- Identifying generic themes (storylines) that emerged and summarising these themes into a thematically unified central storyline(s);
- Reporting of the findings based on the generic storylines (themes) and summarising in a central storyline.

The following suggestions by Creswell (1998) were implemented for **data verification**: peer reviewing, member/participant checks, clarifying researcher bias and using rich thick descriptions of the setting and the processes followed.

**Ethical clearance** for the study was granted by the Senate Research Committee of the University of the Western Cape after all required ethical considerations were set out to their satisfaction. The Department of Social Development of the Western Cape gave consent to Places of Safety for recruiting volunteers to participate in the study.

The goal and potential risks of involvement in the study were explained to prospective participants. Volunteers were informed about anonymity in reporting of the findings; it was

stressed that the findings would be used for research purposes only and that no information would be used against them. They were also briefed about their right to withdraw at any time and about their access to debriefing.

**DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

**TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS**

Sex	Race	Current age	Age first on street	Language	Institutions for interventions/ detentions <sup>2</sup>	Types of offences charged and convicted since living on streets	No. of offences
Male	African	16	10	Xhosa	Bonnytown, Lindelani, Bosasa, Homestead	Theft	4+
Male	Coloured	16	8	Afrikaans	Bonnytown x2 Lindelani, Pollsmoor	House-breaking	5+
Male	Coloured	15	13	Afrikaans	Bonnytown, Pollsmoor, Bosasa, Rosendal House, Boys town x2	House-breaking, theft, possession of drugs	5+
Male	Coloured	17	5	Afrikaans	Bonnytown, Pollsmoor	Possession of drugs, theft	3+
Male	Coloured	15	11	Afrikaans	Lindelani	Theft, house-breaking	4+
Male	Coloured	15	13	Afrikaans	Bonnytown, Bosasa	Theft, theft out of motor vehicle	5+
Female	Coloured	17	15	Afrikaans	Vredelust house x2 Pollsmoor, Ons plek	House-breaking and robbery	5+

<sup>2</sup> Places of intervention and detention: Lindelani- Place of Safety for boys aged 8-15/16 years (trial awaiting); Bonnytown – Place of Safety for boys 15-17 yrs (trial awaiting); Bosasa – secure care centre (trial-awaiting boys); between 15-17 years); Homestead – Shelter for street children under the age of 16 (boys only); Ons Plek (children’s home); Pollsmoor (prison); Rosendal (children’s home); Vredelust house (children’s home)

## **DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES (STORYLINES) THAT EMERGED FROM PARTICIPANTS' NARRATIVES**

In the following discussion the findings are reported in a narrative way based on themes (storylines) and, where appropriate, sub-themes that emerged from the participants' stories about going onto the street and surviving there. It aims to convey the march of events in the life of these participants.

Table 2 reflects the themes and sub-themes in relation to experiences of going to the street and staying on the street. The discussion that follows is structured according to this summary.<sup>3</sup>

### **TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF THE THEMES THAT EMERGED IN RELATION TO EXPERIENCES LEADING TO GOING TO THE STREET AND STAYING ON THE STREET**

Theme 2.1 Material, social and emotional deprivation in family life before leaving home
Sub-themes: 2.1.1 Family violence
2.1.2 Substance abuse by parents
2.1.3 Poverty issues
2.1.4 Instability in family life
Theme 2.2 Problems at school and going to the street
Theme 2.3 Influence of peers for going to the street

#### **THEME 2.1 MATERIAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEPRIVATION IN FAMILY LIFE BEFORE LEAVING HOME**

Participants were asked to start their stories with a reflection on their motivation for going to the streets. The first theme that emerged was their experiences of material, social and emotional deprivation.

According to Krieger (2001), deprivation can be conceptualised and measured at both the individual and area level in relation to material deprivation and social deprivation. Material deprivation refers to the lack of basics for survival such as provision for dietary needs, clothing, housing, home facilities. Social deprivation refers to a person's perceived lack of rights and opportunities in relation to employment, family activities, integration into the community, and formal participation in social institutions, recreation and education. Children can also be regarded as being emotionally deprived if they experience a lack of appropriate interpersonal support and caring in their early developmental years (Dorland's Medical Dictionary, 2007).

Participants reported several interrelated issues that lead to material, social and emotional deprivation and which eventually contributed to their leaving home for the streets. Narratives indicated that they were exposed to poverty, family violence and substance abuse within the family. They also referred to feelings of abandonment and limited contact with their family as well as the inability of their parents to control their movements. The total family setting also contributed to problems at school.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the quotes from the participants' narratives are presented in Afrikaans to reflect the very specific dialect of communication of the street group and added depth to the study. The translation into English only captures the central point they wanted to convey.

The following sections elaborate on this summary, referring to the sub-themes related to material, social and emotional deprivation.

### **SUB-THEMES 2.1.1 POVERTY ISSUES**

Participants' responses indicated that they suffered **material deprivation** because their basic needs were not met by their parents. This seemed to have been a strong motivator to move to the street and to try and make a living on the streets. The following quotes illustrate experiences of living in poor conditions:

*Ons almal, ons slaap almal buite.. My pa, smokkel nou, en dan my suster se pa en my ander klein broertjie se pa – hy smokkel. (We all, all of us (family) sleep outside.... my father smuggles now and my sister's father and my younger brother's father, he's smuggling.)*

*Soos 'many times even' Saterdag en Sondag dan is daar niks kos by die huis nie... Ek vat dit so....hier waar ek op straat bly ekke eet elke dag.Dan het ek klomp geld op my dan gaan ek dan koop ek kos. (Many times there was no food in the house, not even on Saturdays and Sundays. On the street, I have money and I can eat every day.)*

A study by Maphatane (1994) indicates that some street children have to support their families with money earned on the street. The question then arises whether parents will make a serious effort to get their children back to school and off the street if they are supposed to contribute to family expenses. (Compare the findings at 2.2 about problems at school). Laylor (1999) confirms that for a great number of street children financial issues are the primary reasons for coming to the streets. A number of studies (Kombarakaran, 2004; Scanlan, Tomkins, Lynch & Scanlan, 1998; Young, 2003) support these findings, but also mentioned that poverty is interrelated with other family insecurities. Ward, Seager and Tamasane (2007) report that children describe "pull" factors for taking to the street as the perception that life on the street would be easier and that it would provide access to the means to make a living.

### **SUB-THEME 2.1.2 FAMILY VIOLENCE**

Participants were exposed to **emotional deprivation** by incidences of severe family violence that motivated them to leave home for the streets. The following quote illustrates this:

*Ek het geloop deur my stiefpa ... Hy wou my verkrag het – toe hardloop ek weg daarvandaan af. Toe besluit ek sommer om nou vanaf op die straat te wees. (It was because of my stepfather ... he tried to rape me. So I ran away. And then I decided to live on the street)*

Most significant also was the report of abusive relationships between parents and between the participants and their fathers. In the following quote a participant reflects on the aggression in the family relationships that eventually motivated him to leave home at the age of eight years:

*Ek het eerste in die Wallacedene gebly, juffrou. Toe't ek nog 'n pa gehad, juffrou. Toe't my pa en my ma so baie gebaklei en toe was ek agt jaar oud gewees, juffrou. Toe't my pa my so erg geslaan en ek het weggehardloop. (I first lived in Wallacedene, miss. Then I still had a father. Then my father and mother fought and I was eight years old, miss. Then my father hit me very badly and I ran away.)*

Another participant reflected on repeated violence in the home and the mother's hesitation to take action against the violent father:



*My ma is te bang om 'n saak te gaan maak teen hom (pa). (My mother was too scared to lay a charge against him).*

Studies by Young (2003) and by Nieuwenhuizen (2008) on street children in Uganda in India respectively confirm that children's experiences of violence in the home were major contributors towards children going to the street. Albertse (2007) reported that the stories of perpetrators of gang rape in prisons indicated that they all left their homes to live on the street at a very young age and that they experienced violent and abusive fathers as one the most important reasons for leaving home.

### **SUB-THEME 2.1.3 SUBSTANCE ABUSE OF PARENTS**

Findings indicated an interrelatedness between violence in the family, substance abuse by parents and a lack of a supportive, structured family life that left children deprived of emotional and social support. Participants witnessed their parents abusing drugs and were also used by parents to obtain money for drugs.

*My pa het buttons gerook, en my ma het ook buttons gerook en gebier. Hulle twee het ook baie gestry (silence) As my ma miskien dronk is of so, dan stry hulle, baklei hulle en so aan in die huis. (My father smoked "buttons", and my mother also smoked "buttons". The two of them used to argue a lot (silence). If my mother is maybe drunk, then they argue, they fight and so on, in the house).*

The following participant reflects on how his father used him to beg for his drug money on the street:

*Ek het op die straat gekom omdat my pa my gebruik het, om geld te skarrel by die mense. Dis hoe ek op die straat gekom beland het. As ek elke middag uit die skool uitgekom het, dan gebruik hy my om drugs geld te vra by die mense. Dis hoekom ek op die straat is. (I came to the street because my father used me to beg for money. This is how I landed on the street. When I came from school in the afternoon, then he would use me to beg for drug money, from the people. This is why I am on the street.)*

The effect of parental substance abuse on the physical and emotional well-being of children has been frequently reported in the literature (Walsh, Macmillan & Jamieson, 2003). In a report to the Provincial Government on the situation of street children in Gauteng by Ward *et al.* (2007) violence and substance abuse were cited as some of the primary reasons why street children in Gauteng took to the streets.

Closely linked to the previous themes of poverty, domestic violence and parental substance abuse was participants' experiences of family instability.

### **SUB-THEME 2.1.4 INSTABILITY IN FAMILY LIFE**

Family instability, for the purpose of the analysis, refers to an identified lack of parental control and support, and an unstable living environment that contributed to emotional and social deprivation. This issue relates to what Mashologu-Kuse (2007) refers to as "family disorganization". The following quote illustrates this:

*Wat ek 3 jaar oud was, het die social worker my weggestuur, voogouers toe in die 'Lavis in. ... ek dink, 13 jaar, ek het skoolgegaan in die 'Lavis in, by Bellvue primary ... dan trek ons. Toe gaan bly ons in die Ruyterwacht in. 'Gat ek daar skool gegaan in die Elsie, by Valhalla Primary, tot ek standard 5 was, toe is ek uit die skool. Daarvandaan gaan ek weer huis toe, na my eie mense toe - daarvandaan toe stuur hulle my weg. Huis*

*Rosendal (kinderhuis) toe. Ek het net 'n jaar daar gebly toe stuur hulle my Boys Town (kinderhuis)toe - daarvandaanaf van Boys Town (kinderhuis) as, het ek weggehardloop huis toe, na my eie ma...na my eie mense toe. (When I was three years old, the social worker placed me in the care of foster parents, who lived in Bishop Lavis. I lived there for a long time. I think, 13 years (pause). I attended school in Bishop Lavis, Bellvue Primary school. Thereafter, I went ... then we moved. Then we went to live in Ruyterwacht. I went to school in Elsies River, at Valhalla Primary. Until I completed standard 5, then I left school. From there, I was sent to Rosendal House (children's home). I went to live there. I was there for a year, when they sent me to Boys Town (children's home). From Boys town, I ran away home, to my own mother ... to my own people.)*

Besides moving between families and institutions as mentioned by this participant, other participants' stories also indicated lack of parental control and family bonding as a result of family violence, substance abuse by parents and poverty conditions. Family breakdown and family disruption, combined with poverty issues, were identified by Scanlan *et al.* (1998), Aderinto (2000) and Ward *et al.* (2007) as "push" factors for children to leave home for the streets. They therefore followed peers for a "better life" on the street. The "better life" refers to income they got from stealing and selling with peer support as reported in 3.2 and 3.3.

A second theme that emerged in relation to experiences for leaving home for the streets was participants' negative experiences of school. This is discussed in the following section.

## **THEME 2.2 PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL AND GOING TO THE STREET**

All children between the ages of 7 to 15 years are compelled to attend school (South African Schools Act 84 of 1996). Participants in this study dropped out of school, roamed around in their communities, found other children on the street and did not want to return to school. Even before they left their homes, they did not want to be in school; they also caused disruption if they did attend school. This is illustrated in the following quote:

*Ek het sommer met die menerens ook baklei en die juffrouens. Slaan ek hulle met die besems en so. Toe skors hulle my van daai skool af. Toe gat ek Bellvue toe. Daar het ek die ruite weer uitgegooi, baklei met die kinders en alles. Daar het hulle my ook weggejaag, toe gaan ek na 'n ander skool. (I fought with the teachers. Then they expelled me from the school. So I went to Bellvue. There I broke the windows and fought with children. They chased me away from there and then I went to a different school.)*

Reporting on a study in Nigeria, Olley (2006) highlights that street children had a history of truancy in school, suspension from school and "school refusal". Ward *et al.* (2007) confirm that street children in Gauteng typically had a long history of problems at school and that this often motivated them to take to the street. Leaving school for the streets left the children deprived of potential educational and social support within a school context and exposed them to more deprivation. These findings are supported by several earlier studies, for example, Farrow, Deishner, Brown, Kulig & Kipke (1992) and Baker (1999).

## **THEME 2.3 INFLUENCE OF PEERS ON GOING TO THE STREET**

The participants in this study were friendly with youths who dropped out of school and followed them to a life on the streets, where they formed a "family of friends" for surviving on the streets.

The following quote is a summary of their experiences:

*Is deur my tjommies ...Ons het saam skool geloop... nie saam skool gelopie. ...een vriend het na my toe gekom, altyd dan het ons library toe gegaan en so-aan. Toe van die library af gaan ons Shoprite toe. Toe gaan steel hy 'n can jam. Toe begin ek glue te trek mos en daarvandaan af toe kom ek straat toe en so-aan en toe vang ek str..d aan. (My friends influenced me... we sometimes attend school and sometimes not. One friend taught me to escape to the library and from there we went to Shoprite where he stole a can of jam. Then I started sniffing glue, followed him to the street and got involved in s...)*

Baker's (1999) study on street children in Durban indicates that family problems, poverty, peer pressure and school problems were by far the most important reasons for leaving home for the streets. Baker notes that some of the stories of children indicate a divided affinity between the family home and friends on the street, but when they were asked to choose, they would rather stay with friends. Street children live in extreme poverty, which forces them to become at least partially self-supporting. It seems as if they believe that life on the street is more secure in terms of providing for basic needs than the parental home (Laylor, 1999:760).

Kidd (2003:245) stresses the role of peers in going to the street and surviving on the streets, and refers to fact that peers become "street family".

The previous section highlighted participants' experiences of going to the streets. In the next section of the discussion the story continues with a focus on the findings related to survival on the street. Table 3 structures the themes/ storylines that emerged from the analysis.

**TABLE 3**  
**THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM EXPERIENCES ABOUT**  
**SURVIVAL ON THE STREET**

Theme 3.1	Surviving with limited family contact whilst on the street
Theme 3.2	Peer modelling and support for survival by means of begging, substance abuse and involvement in criminal activities
Theme 3.3	Experiences of criminal activities as primary means of survival
Theme 3.4	Experiences of intervention and detention

### **THEME 3.1 SURVIVING WITH LIMITED FAMILY CONTACT WHILST ON THE STREET**

It was clear from participants' stories that, not only did they not have strong bonds during the time they lived at home, but they also had limited contact with family members after they left home. The participants stated that they go home from time to time, but the time spent at home is minimal because there is no incentive to stay as circumstances were perceived as unchanged. Survival on the street was their only option. The following quote is a typical illustration of their experiences in this regard:

*En toe het ek, het ek daar gebly vir 3 jaar was ek op die straat gewees. Daarna, toe't ek weer huis toe gegaan. En dit het nog nie goed gegaan by die huis nie. Niks verander nie ... bakleiery en niks kos. Toe't ek weer straat toe gegaan. ( I lived there for three years on the street. Then I went back home. And it did not go well at home. Nothing changed, fighting and no food. Then I moved back to the street.)*



According to Kidd (2003:254), the support of family while on the street has received little attention in literature. His study points to the importance of “establishing supportive contact with at least one member if such a situation is viable for a given person”.

Another theme in the storyline about surviving on the street was the role of peer modelling and support.

### **THEME 3.2 PEER MODELLING AND SUPPORT FOR SURVIVING BY MEANS OF BEGGING, DRUG ABUSE AND INVOLVEMENT IN CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES**

Participants were attracted to peers who were “street wise” and who knew where to stay, and where and how to get money and drugs. Most of them started off by learning to beg, but they soon learned from peers that stealing was much more lucrative. So they entered into a cycle of stealing, drug abuse, petty crime, drugs, and more serious crimes. The following quotes illustrate this:

*Ek het nie geweet hoe om te vra nie, B het my gewys:... ‘auntie het ’n paar sente vir ’n broodjie nie?’.... en van geld vra oorgegaan na steel... (I did not know how to beg. B showed me ... ‘auntie, can you give me a few cents for bread?’ ... and from begging I moved to stealing...)*

*Ek het ’n ander bratjie gehet op die straat. Hy’t elke dag geld gehet. Ek’t hom gevra, waar kry hy die geld. Dan sê hy my hy skarrel. ... by jolle en parking areas... hulle gee 5 rande, 10 rande. .. Vrydagaande en Saterdagagaande. En so het ek saam met hom gegaan en geskarrel en later liewer gesteel. (I had another friend on the street. He had money every day. I asked him where he got the money. Then he told me that he begged for money ... at night clubs, parking areas. They pay R5 and R10. Friday and Saturday evenings. And so I went with him and begged and eventually rather stole.)*

The influence and support of peers in the cycle of drug abuse and criminal activities for survival is best portrayed in the following quote:

*Ek was elf, twaalf jaar oud gewees ... toe het ek op die straat gekom en daar gebly. En toe sien ek, hey, my tjommies, hulle almal, hulle gaan so Parow toe, steel, doen dinge, rook dagga ... Toe join ek hulle op die ou end. Geslaap daar, gerook, gesteel, in gebreek saam met mense, tot nou toe. Gesteel en ingebreek, grootgeraak. (I think I was eleven, twelve years old. Then I came to the street, and then we lived there. Then I saw my friends are all going to Parow to steal and smoke dagga. Then I join them. I slept there, stole, joined them for house breaking, until now. I stole and broke into houses and I grew up on the street.)*

Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003) report that the role of the street group is significant for physical survival. The street children share resources and this sharing provides the group with a means of survival. Members of a street child subculture also draw newcomers into the field and teach them survival skills of begging and stealing and socialise them. These findings are supported by Kidd (2003). Aderinto (2000) indicates that respondents from a study in Nigeria survived by undertaking activities such as car washing, bus conducting and load carrying. Foutie (2004), reporting on a study in South Africa, mentions activities such as begging, scavenging and doing odd jobs like helping with parking. While participants in the study of MacDonald (2009) started off trying to make a living with similar jobs, they ultimately survived by means of involvement in stealing and selling of stolen goods for food and drugs.

Participants' experiences of survival by means of criminal activities explain how they become trapped in a very specific street-life culture as indicated in the next discussion.

### **THEME 3.3 EXPERIENCES OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES AS PRIMARY MEANS OF SURVIVAL**

The ultimate means of survival for all participants in this study was stealing and selling for food and drugs. All have been found guilty of several criminal offences since they have been on the street. They were detained and referred to children's homes or diversion centres several times. Many other times they were not caught. Some of the participants emulated experienced gang members and the cycle of drug abuse, crime and further drug abuse was perpetuated. The following excerpts from narratives are illustrative of this life style:

*Bly in 'n bos in bungalou-begreta, wat hulle gemaak het. Daar was net agge (28-bende) in gewees mos. Ek mos klaar begin buttons leer rook, dan kap hulle vir my buttons en so-aan en koop glue en so aan. Dan het hulle vir my gewys, ja, ons gaan die aand op 'n mission. Die aand toe gaan wys hy mos vir my ek moet 'n pos vang (wag staan), moet ek kyk of daar nie polisie of mense aan kom nie. So het hy vir my ook gewys hoe om karre in te breek en so-aan. Agterna daai, toe breek ons saam in. Dan breek hy die next dag, dan breek ek weer die ander dag in. En so dit net aangegaan en toes' ek weer gemang (gearrester). Toe't daai laaitie mos vir my gesê, as ek daar wil gaan bly, dan moet ek elke dag karre in breek. Ons het mos getik daarso, dan gaan breek ek elke dag karre in. (We stayed in a bush in a bungalow, which the 28 gang members built. I have already started smoking mandrax. The others gave me more drugs and indicated that we are expected to go on a mission that night. At first I had to stand guard and then I went with the others to break into cars and afterwards we took turns. I was arrested but I afterwards I went back to them. We used 'tik' and I was told that if I want to stay with the group I have to break into cars every day.)*

Stories about involvement in crime were told in a matter-of-fact way. When asked about feelings after the incidents, the general theme was:

*niks gevoel nie ... dit was lekker gewees ... ons staan by die hotel en dan rob hulle die mense se geld, selfone, kettings...* (did not feel anything, it was fun ... we stood at the hotel and rob people of money, cell phones and chains...)

Participants continued with criminal activities and their motivation for repeatedly offending was ascribed to dependence on drugs and lack of fear of the consequence as indicated in the following quotes:

*Is die glue en die buttons en tik wat in my is wat ek nie weet hoe om uit my te kry nie.. Dan kry ek die lekker feeling. Naai, ek kan maar nou 'n skyf trek en 'n head slat. Nou, daai maak my nog net so deurmekaar. Gaan breek ek net in vir nog tik-geld, vir glue ... (It is the glue and the buttons and the tik that is in me and that I do not know how to get it out. Then I get the nice feeling and I think I can take more drugs. Then I really get confused. Then I break in at another home for money for drugs.)*

*Ek het gedink, ek worry nie, dit was nog nie sò hard in die selle nie, sien. Want ek gedink ek gaan maar net elke keer weer selletjies toe. Toe gaan breek ek maar net weer in en het so aangegaan. En het weer gemang (gearrester) en gesien ek tol die saak aanmekaar, aanmekaar (saak herhaaldelike uitgestel). So het ek weer aangegaan en ingebreek. (I thought, I wouldn't worry, it wasn't so hard in the cells. Because I*

**thought I was going back to the cells again. Then I went to break into a house again. Then I was arrested again and I saw that the case was postponed several times, so I just continued with the housebreaking.)**

Laylor (1999) reports that street children are often involved in delinquent behaviour. This takes the form of the younger boys mainly engaging in petty theft such as stealing food from shops/markets, and older boys may become involved in more confrontational crimes such as pick-pocketing and robberies. He further states that these activities, inevitably, bring the street children into contact with the police. Bezuidenhout and Joubert (2003:61) state that in South Africa street children specialise in crimes such as pick-pocketing, prostitution and gang-related activities. Living on the street inevitably leads to juvenile misbehaviour.

A number of more recent studies, for example, Kombarakaran (2004), Olley (2006) and Ward *et al.* (2007), indicate incidences of street children's involvement in drugs and criminal activities. What is significant about the stories of participants in the study by MacDonald (2009) reported here is that they reflect that the children are trapped in a cycle of drug abuse and crime that has become a way of life for them.

The next section deal with participants' experiences of intervention programmes in surviving as street children.

### **THEME 3.4 EXPERIENCES OF DETENTION AND INTERVENTION FOR SURVIVAL**

The participants in this study were all exposed to restricted environments after one or more of their arrests. None of the participants have been given a prison sentence. While awaiting trial, some were detained in police custody and then brought before the court. Afterwards they were either sent to a Place of Safety, secure care centre or correctional facility whilst awaiting trial.

The participants did not like being detained in a cell, but they knew that it was temporary and the experience did not serve as a deterrent. Most of them liked the staff at places of detention and in the diversion programmes. They especially also liked the "jolly" occasions like parties, but eventually experienced the programmes and places as "boring" and wanted to leave for their life on the street. The female participant reported having a hard time with other girls in a facility, but had a very supportive and caring relationship with an older lady whom she called her "mother". Abrams (2006:71) explains that "offenders tend to maintain positive relationships with facility staff, who often became mentors and parental figures for them". This however, does not seem to stop them from going back to the street.

All participants were also involved in day-care and prevention programmes. They reported that they enjoyed the food and shelter for a time, but it was not enough to keep them occupied and stop them from going back to life on the street and getting involved in repeated crimes for money for drugs and food. They attended programmes when they felt like it and some said that being in a children's home was boring. Compare the following quotes:

*Hulle't gesê ek hoef net 6 maande daar te bly om te kyk of my gedrag gechange het ... maar dit was net bymekaar om 6 maande te word, toe hardloop ek weg. Dit was vervelig gewees. Hoekom, daar kyk jy net in bos vas en so aan. (They said I must only stay for 6 months to assess whether my behaviour has changed. But when it was nearly 6 months, I ran away. It was boring there. Because you are just surrounded by bushes.)*

*Net wanneer ek voel om daantoe te gaan dan gaan ek daan toe. Maar die ander tye wat ek nou vir so lank weggebly het, dan wil hulle my mos nie meer daar hê nie. (Only when I felt like going (to No Limits), then I went. But other times, when I used to stay away for a long period, then they did not want me there.)*

Some reported getting their friends in secure placements and joining them for fights and tattooing:

*Ek het nog nie geworry nie. Ek het net gecheck, hulle het mos gesê dis 'n place of safety. Toe gaan ek, toe dink ek toe, "a plek of safety". Toe agterna, toe kry ek my vriende daarso, wat ek op straat gekry het, en so-aan, mense van die Bellville-Suid. En toe aangegaan. Toe sien ek mense baklei nog nie daar nie, maar nie vir lank nie, toe sien ek mense baklei en steek tjappies (tattoes) en so-aan. Toe maak ek ook maar so. (I didn't worry. I thought, they said a place of safety. Then I thought I am going to a place of safety. Afterwards I got my friends there that lived with me on the street, and people from Bellville-South. Then I saw the people did not fight there, but not for long. Then I saw people fighting and making tattoos. And so I joined.)*

Interventions by service providers were thus experienced as temporary relief and entertaining for a while, but this did not deter the children from going back to the street.

Rossouw (1999) is concerned that youth offenders are processed through juvenile courts only to re-offend. Bigelow (2000:563) states that institutionalisation, such as at juvenile detention centres, exposes at-risk delinquents to high levels of deviant peer group experiences that accelerate their life course of offending. Kidd (2003) reports that participants in a qualitative study in Vancouver, Canada, report negative experiences of intervention methods of agencies and mental health professionals.

The question that needs to be answered is how to break the cycle of involvement in delinquent activities by these youngsters if they do not experience the intervention programmes as helpful. The following summary indicates the central storyline that runs through the stories of participants in this study.

## SUMMARY

The story begins with participants' experiences leading to their leaving home for the streets. They left because they were exposed to extreme conditions of material, social and emotional deprivation. Because of poverty and unemployment, parents were not able to provide for their children's basic daily needs such as food and shelter. Their comments on their living conditions indicate that a number of participants were exposed to unstable conditions at home, ranging from moving between homes of extended family members, to foster care parents and institutions. The majority of participants experienced domestic violence. They witnessed their fathers abusing their mothers and also themselves experienced physical and emotional abuse by their fathers. The causative or aggravating factors were substance abuse by fathers and some mothers. The participants reported seeing their parents drinking together and then fighting and arguing when they were under the influence of a substance. The narratives also indicated that some children were instructed to go to the streets and find the drugs for their parents.

Home circumstances were not conducive to supporting school attendance. All participants reported problems at school. They joined friends who had similar experiences at school, were involved with drugs, and eventually dropped out of school and went to live on the street.

The story unfolded with experiences of survival on the streets. They were introduced to street life by peers. Survival on the street started by befriending other street children who knew where to sleep, how to beg and where to get drugs. Begging was soon abandoned for a more secure “income” through housebreaking, robbing and breaking into cars. Coping with street life became a vicious cycle of involvement in criminal activities and drug abuse. All participants in this research reported dependence on drugs. Selling stolen goods in order to buy drugs seemed to be a major motivator for repeated involvement in crime. Participants did not fear the consequences of their actions. Intervention programmes were experienced as a “nice” interlude, which became boring after some time. They did, however, offer the opportunity to reconnect with other street children and gang members who were in the same programmes.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Unlike the story of the main character in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, there was nothing romantic in the central storyline that emerged from narratives of participants in this study. Stories had indeed similar sad beginnings reflecting children’s efforts to escape from material, social and emotional deprivation for a “better life” on the street. The better life likewise meant learning creative coping strategies for survival, but unfortunately it also meant getting caught up in an worsening spiral of drug abuse and repeat crimes, more like the brother of the main character of the movie. Consequently the stories of participants of this study still carry on and might have very sad endings for the youngsters, the families and their victims of their criminal activities. From the researchers’ point of view there was certainly no “millionaire” ending to the story, yet from the participants’ perspective street life could be likened to a millionaire’s life in comparison with their home circumstances.

The findings of this contextual study are of limited scope and are meant to alert all social service professionals to the need for comprehensive quantitative and qualitative team research projects on the crucial issues that emerged from this research.

One such emerging issue from the participants’ stories that was beyond the scope of this article is the need for a study that focuses on discourse analysis to explore and/or enrich the understanding of a perceived street-life “sub-culture” and the street children’s sense of identity. Within the South African context of poverty, drug abuse, unemployment and HIV/AIDS, the issue of children living on and off the streets should urgently be addressed on different levels and from a multidimensional perspective. Social workers should be at the forefront with an evaluation of existing programmes, creatively adapting current interventions and continuously being involved in awareness-raising programmes.

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