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## Investigating the status of the street children: challenges and opportunities

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of street children, a social problem causing vulnerability, has a long history in the world and recently it has increased in the author's country due to various factors. Thus the article deals with street children in Hamadan, Iran. Following Delfi's, the instruments used to collect the data have been a researcher-made questionnaire, interviewing the children and their families, and consulting the authorities. The questions posed down in this study are 1) who are street children? 2) why is it necessary to pay attention to these children? 3. What factors are involved in creating the phenomenon? 4) What steps have been taken by public, private, and international organizations to solve this problem? What guidelines are effective in reducing the phenomenon?

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### 1. Introduction

Today the majority of the scholars consider the phenomenon of street child as an increasing social problem. The poor children, with or without family, living in streets, train stations, and other business centers make a portion of human society» (Amiri,2001). Studying this phenomenon may prevent social problems from happening.

The street children are threatened by the bitter experience of being separated from their family and losing hygiene and education. They encounter poverty and some other dangers that have destroying effect on their health. They face hunger, malnutrition, hygiene problems, lack of mental health, delayed development, and less achievement in education.« Lack of physical health affects mental health negatively and consequently their concentration is weakened. Hence, severe decrease in their social performance». (Boswell,1988).

Keeping what mentioned above in mind, we should confess that the ever increasing phenomenon of street children and the guidelines suggested to solve it should be revisited. Since these children are of various ranges of age, they need suitable environment to develop.

To save these children from committing criminal, stealing, and personality disorder, we should acquire more knowledge about their living condition. This study, being conducted concerning the street children in Tehran, Iran, tackles the following questions:

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1. Who are street children?
2. Why is it necessary to pay attention to them?
3. What factors give rise to this phenomenon?
4. What kinds of attempt have been made by state, nonstate, and international organizations to solve this problem?
5. What maxims (guidelines) are appropriate to decrease this phenomenon?

## 2. Who are the street children?

There is a vast spectrum of street children with different conditions of life according to international organizations (UNICEF and international agency of street children), street children can be categorized into four groups based on

their life status: a) those who lack home and family and live in the streets. These children are termed “vagrant”; b) those who possess home and family but, for one reason, they have divorced their family and live in small groups and are sometimes supported by the related band; c) those who are kept in specific centers, but have previously been living in a homeless status and they are threatened to go back to the same situation; d) the children who are living in their family but, for various reasons, mainly poverty, they spend some nights and many hours of the day in the streets. This group is also divided into two subgroups: 1) those who do different activities such as selling flower and newspaper, searching through bins, polishing shoes etc. In the street. They constitute labor and street children; 2) those who either by themselves or accompanying their parents indulge in begging and some of them, in very young, age are abused as an instrument of mendacity. All these children possess the following common feature although they differ in some ways:

- They spend most of their time in the streets.
- They are deprived of their basic rights, that is, education, hygiene, nutrition, and security.
- Due to their long presence in the street, they experience many problems.

Based on the research conducted the majority of the street children in Tehran are those who are living with their family (83%). Most of these children, because of poverty, are working and begging (78% work and 21% beg). There is also a second group who have divorced their family and they live either alone or with others (11%). Many of the very group work in the street.

## 3. Why is it essential to pay attention to the street children?

«Street children make a growing phenomenon in the world .. Based on statistics available there are some hundred million street children in the world. In our country, There is no access to an exact statistics» (Kinabalu, 2008).

Official statistics have declared 20,000 children of this kind. According to State Welfare Organization the number of children collected from the streets in 1382 is 30,188. Considering the statistics given below, the number of labor and street children are so much more than those declared in official statistics. In 1382, according to the minister of education, 350,000 people dropped out school and 150,000 people did not have the chance to register for a school. Undoubtedly, a large number of these people are labor and street children. According to officials, 12,000,000 people are living in absolute poverty. Naturally, a great number of these people are the ones who join labor and street children. Street children, due to their particular condition, are more vulnerable.

A review of the existing statistics reveals the vulnerability of children in the world.

- 100,000,000 street children in the world are living agonizing lives.
- 250,000,000 children under legal working age are working in third world countries.
- 150,000,000 children in the world suffer from malnutrition
- More than half of African children suffer from diseases caused by water contamination and lack of hygiene.
- Almost one-fourth of 17,000,000 people who have died of HIV, have been children.

The harmful effects of these traumas are not limited to childhood, and will continue till adulthood, and deprive a society of its efficient and qualified members. Childhood is the crucial period of development and nurturing of human being. Paying attention to it and providing appropriate facilities for a better life, are of our great responsibilities. Naturally, such children will provide themselves and their society with opportunity of improvement.

The research conducted about the harmful consequences of the phenomenon of street children reveals the fact that these children have problems in all aspects of growth (physical, kinesthetic, emotional, psychological, social, and intellectual). From the standpoint of physical and kinesthetic growth, 60 to 84 percent of street children are faced with the problems such as anemia, height and weight losing, diseases related to mouth and heart, digestive problems, and malnutrition.« From the standpoint of intellectual growth, 17 to 56 percent of them have problems such as illiteracy, speech difficulties, lack of concentration, learning difficulties, and lack of recognition of environment»( Bezprizorniki.2011). Emotionally, 40 to 89 percent of them suffer from problems such as self-inferiority, restlessness, vengefulness, pessimism, depression, fear and insecurity, identity crisis, and anxiety. From social development point of view, 37 to 80 percent of them have problems such as aggression, theft, sexual abuse, destruction, tendency to delinquency, addiction and drug dealing, and difficulty in making appropriate relationships with others.

#### **4. What factors contribute to creation of the phenomenon of street children?**

Basically, due to the complexity of social problems, a variety of factors contribute to the creation of them. Generally, there are four effective factors in creation of social issues.

- Economical factors such as poverty, injustice, unemployment, big gap in social classes, unjust distribution of wealth, etc..

\*Social and cultural factors including structural combination and population growth, migration, war, changes in social and cultural values, the differences among generations, and differences in attitudes and wrong and discriminative beliefs such as considering children as a source of income, being harsh towards them, and lack of organizations to support them etc.

Family factor including extended, populated, and stressful families with delinquency and addiction background, parents' unawareness of their appropriate needs etc.

Individual or bio-psycho factors including characteristics of children, children's mental capacity and capabilities in tackling life problems, maturity crisis and its effects etc.

These factors themselves are affected by economic, cultural, social, and family factors.

Researches done about the extent to which these factors affect the phenomenon of street children in our country have shown the effectiveness of the mentioned four factors, but the economic factors in the first place and then family factors especially inappropriate behavior towards the children have been effective in initiating this phenomenon.

Most of street children come to street for earning money and support. The effect of poverty in initiating this phenomenon is an important factor to be considered in selecting appropriate procedures to control it.

#### **What steps have been taken concerning street children so far? 2.**

These steps which constitute the existing challenges in this area can be investigated in three levels:

##### **a) Steps taken by governmental organizations: the steps taken by Welfare Organization with the help of the City Hall, Ministry of Interior, and Management Organization from 1998:**

Organizing the committee of street children \*

Removing street children in Tehran\*

\*Establishing some centers for taking care of street children and educating them

Establishing centers to intervene crisis in Tehran and other cities \*

\*Holding conferences regarding street children

\*Being in contact with non-governmental and international organizations (UNICEF) and planning programs common to them

**b) Steps taken by non-governmental organizations:**

- \* Establishing open centers for educating street children and being in contact with their families in Tehran
- \*Holding conferences concerning street children
- \*Holding conference, workplace, and exhibition regarding street children and informing people about the issue
- \*Establishing relation and cooperation with governmental organizations and UNICEF

**Measures (steps) taken by UNICEF:**

- Holding workshops for street children
- Conducting a study on street children
- Establishing relationship with government agencies to conduct joint Projects
- Supporting government agencies financially and technologically including sabbatical opportunities to take advantage of the experiences of other countries in this area
- Communication and cooperation with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs )
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**5. What are ways to reduce the phenomenon of street children?**

Offering solutions is one of the important challenges Related to street children. Before explaining guidelines, it is necessary to note the following:

- Delayed action in connection with street children: for years, government agencies responsible for the actions in this area denied the existence of street children. After a few years, they accepted the fact and since then have taken measures to reduce this phenomenon.
- The necessity of evaluation of measures taken by government and nongovernmental organizations and UNICEF to be accurately informed of the results of these measures and the existing problems and provide appropriate solutions
- The emphasis on prevention in order to prevent the reproduction of street children
- Focus on the causes of street children and its priorities and integrating its related strategies
- Reducing the focus on major cities and paying attention to towns and villages as resources of reproduction of these children
- Emphasis on the situation in our society
- The phenomenon of street children cannot be raised but it can be reduced. The reduction cannot be achieved too soon and just by running a few projects rather it will be operable in the form of a process of long-term, mid-term, and short- term solutions.

Considering these points, the following guidelines at three levels (macro, medium, and micro) and the three dimensions of time (long-term, mid-term, and short term), based on research conducted, are offered:

- Long-term strategies at the macro level, including exterminating poverty, preparing welfare and social justice, reducing hierarchical discrimination because of the influence of poverty in creating street children
- Focus on public education, especially that of parents, in order to change negative attitudes towards children and cultural regeneration of society, especially drug addiction and crime, emphasis on reducing social problems including population growth, immigration, mental illness, etc. Obviously, the realization of these

methods requires planning at the macro level of society and requires changes in economic, social and cultural structures of society.

- Mid-term and short-term solutions in governmental and nongovernmental organizations in connection with children include:
- Developing protection laws and revising some of the existing ones related to the labor and street children
- Supervising the strict enforcement of existing laws, including laws regarding labor child, child's rights treaty, law of the protection of children and adolescents, and the ILO Convention 182. All of these laws have been approved.
- Joining the network to the integrated system of supporting these children in order to coordinate government agencies and NGOs, to prevent duplication and provide appropriate services to children
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### **Properly organizing labor and street children**

Since 1977 up to now "collecting" labor and street children has been done to organize them without any positive results but spending money and creating problems for children. Properly organizing street children include:

- Identifying street children and its types with respect to life style in order to satisfy their specific needs. Based on a research, about 83 percent of children live with their families; hence, "collecting" them does not solve the problem.
- Contacting families of these children, supporting them financially, legally, educationally, medically, consultatively via the provision of necessary services
- Establishing appropriate open support centers with a comprehensive training program to provide the children with the necessary and voluntary services. «Experience has shown that open centers for voluntarily attending street children arranged by the NGOs, unlike the governmental centers, have been welcomed by these children and their families» (Kinabalu ,2008 ).These centers are particularly important, for they facilitate the process of identifying street children.
- Employing social workers in all stages of organizing process to voluntarily attract them to support centers instead of using police to arrest them.
- Providing shelters for street children in their life and work place so that those, who do not live with their families and have various service needs, can voluntarily refer to them.
- Preventing the worst forms of child labor in the streets and other places due to the adoption of ILO Convention 132 and the labor law. Long hours of work in the street, all kinds of abuse of children, things like searching in garbage, etc. are inconsistent with this Convention and laws on child labor.
- providing social insurance for street children.

### **Conclusion:**

The idea of studying street children has occupied the mind of sociologists unquestionably. To do any attempt to stop or control the phenomenon of street children requires identifying this group of people in the way they have been categorized in this paper. However, such a prevention or control needs some particular measures which can be affected by executive, governmental, nongovernmental, and charity institutions. The most important measures are as follows:

- The sensitivity and activity of religious institutions towards the phenomenon (street children)
- Economical, social, and cultural supports directed towards the families of street children by nongovernmental organizations and the development of social insurance

- Establishing semi- family centers for the street children without family to yield such children to the families without children
  - Developing shelters for the children without family, and teaching them technical and professional skills
  - Providing and equipping human resources to find job for street children and adolescents in governmental and nongovernmental organizations
  - Using the successful experiences of other countries in organizing and regenerating the street children
- The performance of these measures may be an effective step to take to reduce the phenomenon of labor and street children.

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