

Street children: “Running from” or “running to”?

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Abstract

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The street child phenomenon presents a complex issue resulting from a diversity of integrated factors. The problem should therefore preferably be explained and addressed holistically. A search of available literature on street children clearly indicates that street children per se are not the primary problem. The phenomenon of street children is merely a symptom of a problem underlying the intolerable situation of these children's family and community lives. In this article it is explained that the street child phenomenon is thus symptomatic of contemporary twentieth century conditions. “Running from” and “running to” are in fact intereffective tendencies or reactions to a complicated polarised society: two sides of a common coin.

1. Introduction

In the midst of drastic and ongoing changes, and a complex social and economic life, contemporary society is characterised by exceptional complexity. The Industrial Revolution and accompanying urbanisation had brought about drastic changes in the primary form and institutions in society. The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century therefore meant a transition from a traditional static to a dynamic, extremely mobile society. A rural community life style has become an urbanised, impersonal and formal businesslike way of life.

The Industrial Revolution, with its concomitant industrial labour and urbanisation, drastically changed the structure of society in general, but also family structure in particular. Pre-industrial society was stable, simple and undifferentiated. The extended family was the most significant form of society as the basic economic unit, within which the various family functions were actualised.

Whereas, formerly, the family constituted the basic unit of society, the modern urbanised family has changed to a group of people having fleeting contact, people who live a complicated life-in-multiplicity and who are characterised by impoverished communication between its members (Pretorius, 1990:102). The contemporary family is influenced by a complex social, economic and cultural environment which has a dynamic influence on its members. Amidst such a

complex and dynamic society with constantly changing norms and values, it has become increasingly difficult to equip children adequately. Harmful and inhibiting social influences inundate and overpower the family situation, to such an extent that parent and child have become engaged in a struggle between familial and social influences (Le Roux, 1992:83).

Street children, the offspring of today's complex urban realities world-wide, represent one of our global family's most serious, urgent and rapidly growing socio-educational challenges. The street has become the common heritage of millions of children, even before they are tainted by drugs, prostitution, abuse, crime and many other socio-educational problems (Le Roux, 1994:1-2). The emergence of street children in the Republic of South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, has been linked to socio-structural factors which, primarily through urbanisation and impoverishment, have led to distortions and often the destruction of family life (Janse van Rensburg, 1994:4).

The street child phenomenon presents a complex issue resulting from a diversity of integrated factors. No single cause can be identified in this regard (Schurink & Tiba, 1993:10). This article will therefore focus on the following question: Is the street child phenomenon predominantly the result of "push" or "pull" factors? Are they "running from" or "running to"?

2. The street child phenomenon

Descriptions of street children world-wide often assume that all street children share the same plight. The terms used in referring to them – abandoned, homeless, vagrant – are vague and inaccurate and easily lend themselves to subjective interpretation (Felsman, 1984:14). Differences in definitions are largely semantic. For the purpose of this article street children can be described as those who have abandoned their homes, schools and immediate communities before they reach the age of sixteen years and have drifted into a nomadic street life. These street children the world over have a common etiology and street lifestyle. In their homes poverty, unemployment, marital dispute and instability, as well as alcohol abuse are endemic, while violence is often the common method of settling interpersonal conflict (Cockburn, 1988:1). While the phenomenon of children living and working on streets in metropolitan urbanised areas is an old one, it can be considered relatively new in the South African context. The first media reports regarding street children appeared towards the end of the 1970s. This phenomenon was, however, only officially recognised in South Africa during the eighties of the present century (Schurink, 1993:266).

A search of available literature on street children clearly indicates that street children are not the primary problem. The phenomenon of street children is merely a symptom of a problem underlying the intolerable situation of these

children's family and community lives. Because of a unique socio-political history the majority of South Africans are trapped in a culture of violence and intolerance which is manifested in family, social and community violence. The current South African society is characterised by a high level of frustration, anomie and normlessness. These phenomena coupled with poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, increasing urbanisation, lack of health, educational and welfare facilities, give rise to the intensifying of a problem already posed by street children in the South African society (Schurink, 1993:276). It would, however, be an unrealistic simplification to try to explain the phenomenon of street children in South Africa, by ascribing it merely to isolated factors such as poverty, a shortage of housing, over-crowding, drug abuse, or the past political system. The problem should rather be explained and addressed holistically (Van Niekerk, 1990:92). Simplification regarding a specific matter (such as street children) often leads to unrealistic conceptualisation and ineffective management of such a matter.

3. Classification of runaway systems

While running away may be an indication of inadequate social or psychological development for a limited number of street children, there is reason to believe that within a historical perspective street children's behaviour can be understood as a spontaneous and natural reaction to certain predictable societal forces and even as a positive response to serious problems (Libertoff, 1980:163).

Street children running from home or to an alternative social setting has become a contentious issue of considerable public attention and social concern. It can be either a response to an unhealthy family or community environment, or can be synonymous with the expression of independence and pleasure-seeking behaviour. A third possibility culminating from above, may be that turning to the streets may be viewed by these children as the most effective way of solving problems experienced from internal or external factors.

The diversity of behaviour patterns, characteristics and motives of runaway street children is prodigious. Because of this complexity, many researchers have tried to bring some orderly classification and conceptual clarity to the runaway tendency among street children. According to Berger and Schmidt (1985), Tsunts (1966), Shellow *et al.* (1967) and Homer (1973), typological systems of runaways can be classified into two general classes. Homer suggests these two groups to be labelled "running from" and "running to" (Brennan, 1980:192). "Running from" refers to children who are essentially escaping from unresolved personal and/or family problems, while the "running to" class is motivated by pleasure-seeking and an urge for independence and adventure. Berger and Schmidt's (1958) "spontaneous runaway" and Tsunts's (1966) "romantic adventurers" are similar to Homer's "running to" type, whilst Berger and

Schmidt's "reactive runaway" and Tsunts's "escapist runaway" are parallel to Homer's "running from" group (Brennan, 1980:192).

In addition to the typifications mentioned above, Greene and Esselstyn (1972) in studying female runaways, developed a typological system which shows similar trends to Homer's description. They classify runaways as falling into three groups: The "rootless" runners are characterised by lack of self-discipline and indulge in frequent pleasure-seeking behaviour (compare Homer's "running to" group). The "anxious" group shows feelings of anxiety and seeks help for problems of a personal and family nature, while the "terrified" group tries to escape from severe situational problems which may include alcoholic parents, abuse, violence and neglect. The latter two forms correspond with Homer's "running from" group (Brennan, 1980:194).

Barth (1986:360) described three categories of runaway youths. The first group runs away from family strain caused by a crisis such as financial problems, parental structure change or limited parental involvement. The second group runs away from excessive parental expectations and control, while a third group runs away from physically and/or sexually abusive family situations. All three of Bath's runaway groups correspond with Homer's "running from" typification.

Street children are therefore not only running from persons, abusive family and societal patterns, but are also searching for people who will show empathy and help them. They are indeed looking for situations where they will be able to reformulate and regain their human dignity. Their greatest fear is not being maltreated on the streets, but that they will end up alone, abandoned and unloved (Maree, 1990:6; Janse van Rensburg, 1994:6).

4. Factors precipitating the street child phenomenon

An extensive search of available literature on street children has revealed an integrative complexity of "pull" and "push" factors as causes for children taking to the streets (compare Taqon, 1991; Forest *et al.*, 1986; Richter, 1991a; Richter, 1991b; Cockburn, 1991; Drake, 1989; Keen, 1990; Swart, 1990; Griesel *et al.*, 1990; Aptekar, 1989; Richter, 1988; Ross, 1991; Hickson & Gaydon, 1989):

- Street children are often victims of factors such as divorce and separation; poor, single-parent households; economic decline; breakdown of family structure and traditional values; child abuse and alcoholism.
- During the eighties, young black people in South Africa left home to co-ordinate, protect themselves from, escape from, or show solidarity with the political struggle.

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- Some investigators describe street children as the social casualties of conscious political decisions.
 - The economic stress of the emerging nuclear urbanised family is projected onto children in households.
 - Family violence often predisposes children to a street life.
 - Nuclear family upheaval in the form of death, desertion, remarriage, overcrowding and school failure occurs.
 - World-wide the reconstituted family situation (e.g. stepparents) is reported as the cause of children leaving home.
 - In industrial countries these children are the victims of factors such as inner-city decay, chronic unemployment, housing shortages, and high divorce rates.
 - Where drought, famine and violence are present, there is a world-wide increase in the numbers of street children.
 - Some children flee the home environment to “be part of the action” on the streets, or are motivated to seek their fortune and find a better life than the one to which they would have been destined had they stayed at home.
 - Some families could not possibly survive economically without the financial contributions of working or self-supportive children.
 - Other causes for turning to the streets may be overcrowding at home, unemployment and consequent poverty, school failure, and familial violence and upheaval. These children are victims of society’s failure to assist and support their families in crises.
 - In circumstances where there is social pathology and anti-social behaviour such as child abuse and neglect in the family situation, children are evicted from their homes as unwanted, or driven away due to a lack of parental concern.
 - The street child phenomenon is, therefore, a world-wide one: a drastic reaction to an anti-child culture.
 - Many street children are victims of the lack of accommodation, frequent moves, sexual abuse and are chased out of their homes.
 - Most children have no other accommodation than the streets.

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- Many children have reportedly run away from home to escape schools where they experience humiliation, rejection and failure.
- For many the move to the street is an adaptive response to the stress and severe oppression experienced by families living in a society of conflict.
- Contrary to popular belief of orphanhood as a cause for moving onto the streets only a very small number of these children are indeed orphans.
- Economic deprivation and the concomitant disintegration of traditional family ties represent a major cause for street life.
- In order to supplement family income, some children merely work on the streets on a temporary basis.
- Migrant labour systems in some countries may be an indirect cause for fostering street children.
- Unrealistic expectations predispose many young children to street life.

Resulting from an extensive empirical research project among South African street children, Smit (1993:108) has categorised three levels of causal factors:

- **Macro level causes** (community context):

Urbanization, forced resettlement, overcrowding, non-compulsory education, school boycotts, destruction of teaching facilities, scarcity of job opportunities, lack of recreational facilities, violence, unrest, lack of community involvement, etcetera.

- **Meso level causes** (family context):

Migratory patterns of parents, family disintegration, single-parent families, physical and psychological maltreatment of children, lack of parental control and supervision, collapse of traditional values, parental absence, presence of step-fathers, value clashes between parents and children, etcetera.

- **Micro level causes** (individual, him-/herself):

Feelings of inferiority, need for personal attention, poor school performance, desertion and orphanhood, feelings of uselessness, desire to survive, love of adventure, peer-group pressure, need to be free, urge for independence, victim of exploitation, etcetera.

5. Discussion

At a glance the above-mentioned causes seemingly point to the street child phenomenon as a flight from negative family and social situations. It is also described as such in scholarly literature. However, a deeper reflection illuminates the fact that "running from" and "running to" are in fact two sides of a common coin. "Running from" reactions intensify, motivate and provide a new meaning to "running to" tendencies.

Where the family and social circumstances as such seem to be experienced as bleak, desperate, negative or unbearable, any alternative seems to be meaningful, significant and rational. External "pulling forces" should, therefore, be evaluated against the background of certain "pushing forces" to gain a realistic and objective perspective. This means that the street child phenomenon should be placed within the total context of contemporary realities. On the one hand, the present post-industrial period is characterised by an attraction to metropolitan areas which promise opportunities for self-improvement, better conditions and many possibilities for self-actualisation. At the same time an ecology of tension, mobility, uncertainty and conflict is created which impacts directly on the very nature of contemporary family situations.

All human beings are born with unique potentialities which can only be actualised optimally through proper guidance within the sphere of a safe and stable environment. This basic right of a child implies that parents accept a particular responsibility for the well-being of their child, his care, protection and safety, his development (becoming) and growth towards adulthood. Affective security is experienced through relationships of trust, authority and understanding as basis for effective child rearing. An ever-increasing inability of many families, as a result of internal factors and external influences, often create an anti-child environment in the family situation which is not conducive to proper education. Where the family fails as a secure, stimulative and dynamic form of society, external alternatives become more lucrative for the child and may even predispose him to a street life.

The numbers of street children in South Africa reflect an increase in the breakdown of family life. The best way to prevent an increase in the number of street children is therefore to concentrate on the upliftment of poor communities. An integrated approach is needed; the government, the church as well as members of the communities themselves, should all work together to prevent children running from home.

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