The Challenges Faced by Children Living on the Streets

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Abstract

A serious risk facing children worldwide is homelessness and living on the streets. This paper sought to provide an understanding into the interplaying factors promoting the prevalence of children living on the streets. To contextualise the findings, a literature review method was used to understand the challenges of children living on the streets. Challenges associated with residing on the streets include the likelihood of harm as a result of risky sexual behaviour which can be escalated by their vulnerability and lack of a protective parent. Furthermore, children living on the streets are at risk of being involved in chronic and relapsing

conditions associated with drug abuse and other criminal activities. Recovery can be a very long enduring process. Moreover, some are also likely to die from hunger and there is a lot of potential that is buried as a result of living on the streets. This paper uses the ecological perspective to emphasise and articulate the role of the social context in shaping the lives of children.

Keywords: *Children, Street, HIV/AIDS, Crime, Drugs, Family, Parents.*

Introduction and Background

There are many challenges facing children globally, and this include child neglect, abandonment, abuse of many forms, exploitation, genital mutilation, killing of those who are albino by certain sects of tribes and villages, abduction, poverty, HIV/AIDS, war and violence among others. In all these challenges, many children are very vulnerable; in those conditions there is an urgent need for policy making and programmatic interventions that have the best interest of the child at heart. In fact, as long as children are not under parental care, they are more vulnerable to a constellation of vices, misinformed choices, bad influence as well as harm and abuse from other people (Nasir & Khalid, 2015).

In some cases, these children can do anything for survival sometimes without their voluntary will but forced by circumstances (Ngom, 2014). This is because where parental guidance coexists with the child, it also strengthens the ability and probability of the child to be safe and in the right perspective. However, it is of paramount concern to note that a huge number of children are without a home and live on the streets as a place of shelter in South Africa. Some of the reasons for these children to be on the streets range from parental negligence to poverty. There are various categories of street children; this include children with families working on the streets, children with weak family ties who live on the streets, abandoned children, runaway children and young delinquents (Nasir & Khalid, 2015). As noted by Malindi and Machenjedze (2012), some of the trends associated with the emergence of street children include disengaging from school by dropping out and adopting street life.

However, school engagement strengthens resilience of these children, and this is why getting the children to school will also add a lot of value and empower these children to aspire for a better life where they are able to direct their lives in the right way. However, some of the reasons for dropping out, as noted by Kang'ethe and Manomano (2016), are also due

to a lack of parental involvement and presence in the lives of the children. These scholars also opine that probably the state of homelessness felt all over the country could be exacerbating the situation. This includes government-provided housing as well as the overcrowded shack dwellings with minimal space for breathing and lack of social spots or even recreational facilities (Manomano, 2013, 2015). Moreover, the COVID-19 virus is also harming health and social and material well-being of children with the poorest including homeless and street children hard hit (OECD, 2020). For millions of young children in Africa, the coronavirus restrictions have made access to food, water and even shelter even more difficult (Griffin, 2020). Due to the heavy-handedness of the strategies in the lockdowns, it has resulted in an impasse regarding the removal of street children from the streets.

Problem Statement

A street child refers to a child who is on his or her own where the streets are his abode. Living on the streets places children in a very vulnerable and risky position and raises concerns about the child's safety and well-being. This paper is directed by the crisis of children who are homeless and living on the streets and do not have a continuity of support and the challenges faced by these children.

Aim and Objective of the Paper

The main aim and objective of this paper is to explore the circumstances of children living on the streets and use the ecological perspective to understand, describe and interpret the risk of children living on the streets as it provides a holistic approach to the interplay of various systems in the life of a child.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study:
    What are the challenges or implications of homelessness that pose a threat to the well-being and safety of children living on the streets?

Methodology

This paper uses a review of literature method to explore and describe the process of pervasiveness of street children in South Africa with a goal to

provide strategies to strengthen mechanisms that can integrate these children back into homes, schools or any other institution which can map their lives forward. Current literature from newspapers, policy documents on children, textbooks and journal articles in the domain of children were carefully selected on the themes of street children in South Africa.

Dysfunctional Families and Street Children

According to the South African White Paper (2013), it is through the family that children are born, socialised and cared for until they attain the age at which they become independent responsible citizens. The family unit is under threat in many societies and, in many instances, struggles to play its important roles in the nurturing, socialisation, caring for and protection of children effectively. Nyanhoto (2017) identifies, among others, various challenges (divorce, marital distress, irresponsible parents or guardians, absentee fathers and poor parenting skills) faced by families. When families are attacked by these, children usually resort to street living as an alternative. Parents play a pivotal role in the strengthening and preservation of families, especially when it comes to the well-being of children. Whether parents are biological, guardian or even grandparents or single parents, their presence and interpersonal relations also reduce unintended consequences or outcomes upon their children, like leaving their homes among other things for the streets (Patrikakou, 2008).

Family cohesion has been identified as an attribute which functions as a protective factor against a number of forms of problematic behaviour among children in families (Nyanhoto, 2017). Cohesion has been defined as "the emotional bonding, togetherness and closeness family members have towards one another" (Riech et al., 2012: 242). When parents neglect their responsibilities of caring for their children, children do not see a symbol of togetherness. The lack of care and affection pushes children away from the home. Hobbs et al. (1999) further indicate that needs that are not met during the growth and development of the child may actually have irreversible consequences. A total of 3.85 million children are orphaned in South Africa (UNICEF, 2014). Sometimes, it could be challenges within the homes where both parents are dead and there is no relative who is willing to assume responsibility. In some of these cases, it is due to a shift from communalism to individualism where extended families are continuously breaking ties and beliefs are centred on one man for himself and not on compassion for the vulnerable children.

However, it is not always parents who are inherently at fault. Poverty in families is also a critical factor that pushes children to live and work on the streets. In some cases, parents are faced with challenges beyond their control, leading to children leaving the family for the streets. For example, some parents with relatively low incomes and limited job opportunities face obstacles in carrying out parenting effectively and may also be overwhelmed by pressures to provide and meet the needs of children. At some point, there can be an impasse if children also fail to understand the agony and struggles that parents undergo, causing them to think that life on the streets is better than in their home. However, Lewis (2013) points out that, once these children start making a living on the streets, it is very difficult to intervene in finding a home or alternative home for them. For example, some of the street children make around R1600 per day from begging in Cape Town. This means that there is the need for a collective approach to assist families in keeping children off the streets.

Associated Factors with Homelessness of Children Living on the Streets

Homelessness of Children and their Increased Risk to HIV/AIDS

There is an inextricable relationship between HIV/AIDS and homelessness, with literature documenting that conditions of homelessness actually increase the risk of contracting HIV. This can occur through intravenously sharing of needles when abusing drugs, which is common among the homeless, and risky sexual behaviour attitudes (Save the Children (UK) South Africa Programme & The Department of Social Development, 2003: Centres for Disease Control and Prevention).

Furthermore, homelessness is also associated with health implications such as poor hygiene, malnutrition and vulnerability to cold and rainy weather which makes them more likely to be ill than those with houses (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006). With proven evidence showing that psychological stress can also worsen the severity of the disease, people who are homeless are more prone to stress which leads to progression of the disease. Some could actually discontinue medication (Gore-Felton & Koopman, 2008). Moreover, 'without a home' may likely imply more chances of lack of proper food and lack of income to afford proper medication associated with HIV/AIDS treatment, which also makes it very difficult for many of them to adhere to treatment (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006). It is no wonder that the access to housing by children is a very critical factor as it also makes them more

vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and further makes them more likely to die sooner than they were supposed to, due to the poor living conditions among other things. Mandalazi, Banda and Umar (2013) indicate that, among other things, street children have been in most cases ignored in the fight against HIV/AIDS and also that street life makes it difficult for meaningful interventions to be made.

Homelessness of Children and Drug Abuse

The fight against drugs is also a very mountainous one in South Africa, with more and more people trapped in the social vice. Furthermore, intake and abuse of drugs increases especially by those who are homeless like the youth. This is a crisis as substance using is chronic and can result in relapsing conditions. Using drugs takes place as a way of avoiding the existing situation of homelessness and the stress that goes with it. Some even go to the extent of using and sharing needles and, in the process, endanger themselves by contracting other diseases through blood. This is not a shocking issue as the study conducted by Manomano (2015) establishes that most of the participants felt that their houses were very small and also indicated that the abuse of drugs was generally high. Moreover, alcohol, tobacco and cannabis are the psychotropic substances that are most commonly used by children and adolescents in South Africa and are also noted to be major contributors towards violence and sexual risky behaviours among other things (Mpofu et al., 2008a; Taylor et al., 2003; Vundule et al., 2001 in Morojele et al., n.d.). Other researchers actually highlight that the lack of parental guidance to regulate behaviour of these children living on the streets makes them to do whatever they please, and they end up engaging in and abusing alcohol and drugs, with some using it as a stress reliever and some terminating their lives through suicide (Setlalenfoa et al., 2010). Unfortunately, with limited help and care, the effects associated with drug abuse are severe.

Homelessness and Crime and Violence

The state of crime and violence in South Africa has reached the levels and proportions of apathy. Despite the country having a very violent and painful past, there is however little benefits from the new constitution and the application and enjoyment of those rights. When looking at crime, most of the much-entrusted state agents from the top management to the wider spectrum of society are either affected or are perpetrators. Although

Zuma was found to be guilty and requested to pay back part of the money, it is however unknown as to how much was siphoned by other officials and never brought to account. The same scenario is prevalent on the streets of South Africa where young men and women without a home resort to crime and violence through stealing from innocent citizens and sometimes even beating them up among other things. Gould (2014) points out that there is a very great disrespect for the rule of law, its value and meaning as well as value of life even by those responsible for and enforcing the law, with many of the children residing on the streets engaging in criminal acts seeing it as a way of life for survival. This is also associated with the fact that most of them are unemployed without access to care and support or may not be willing to access it as well. The National Crime Prevention Strategy indicates that South Africa's 'historical confrontation and conflict has bequeathed to the country a culture of violence' which perceives violence as rather normative than deviant (Shabhangu, n.d.: 8). Therefore, especially in major cities, crime and violence by those who are homeless can take place even in broad daylight and rarely will other citizens intervene. For example, during the violent episodes of xenophobia, it was apparent the country was in a state of emergency due to the crisis of foreigners being attacked by some locals. In some of these cases, some foreigners who died lost their lives in broad daylight while other residents and citizens were looking on. This is the same scenario on the streets.

Ecological System Theory

As indicated by numerous studies, there are some circumstances that also create an enabling environment for effective parenting such as level of income, job autonomy and, to some extent, high emotional levels and availability of support structures to complement the efforts and abilities of parents (Greenberger, O'Neil, & Nagel, 1994; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000 in Viera et al., 2016). It is also evident that once a child has resorted to street living, it is difficult for the family to fight the battle of keeping the child off the streets alone. In trying to strengthen mechanisms towards keeping children off the streets, the paper proposes that social workers should adopt the ecological systems theory, also known as the ecological perspective. Social Work is concerned with enhancing normal social functioning and ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected and supported. In doing so, the profession strives to be a voice to the voiceless by using theoretical constructs that contend for addressing inequality and promoting the dignity and worth of all people to name just a few.

The ecological systems theory was developed by an American psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner. The model outlines different aspects that can shed light on the understanding of where street children are coming from and how to integrate them into a new environment, which could be the family, school or child and youth care centre. The various aspects are mainly the structural influence and meaning of social relations. The theory acknowledges that the different surrounding environments play a major role in the child's development. Bronfenbrenner stipulates that the process of a child's development is affected by social relationships which appear within and between the systems, and also the child's relations within a bigger social context. In the social work context, the ecological perspective allows the practitioner to assess and define various components of the client's situation. It allows the street children's lives to be understood in the broad context of social systems that surround them (Donoghue, Munford, & Nash, 2005). The ecological perspective has got significant views about influences on child behaviour, their relationship to the world and their development. The perspective views the child as within the family, social, environmental and cultural context. It emphasises the child's everyday experience in social settings in relation to their learning and development (Brody & Stevenson, 2013).

The theory explains the environmental influences to individuals in four different levels, namely the micro, meso, exo and macro systems. The question here will be, what role could these four-level play in ensuring that children are kept off the street? The micro system focuses on the relationship between the individual and his/her basic or immediate environment. In dealing and understanding street children, the micro system focuses on the influence of the family (the immediate environment) on the development of the child. Through its stability, the family has an important function of producing healthy citizens and it is seen as a collective unit that protects and assists the individual to confront and cope with stressful demands of daily life (Mashologu-Kuse, 2007). Various researchers concur that the influx of children from homes to the street is caused by family problems such as lack of support, rejection, high flown parent expectations and physical and sexual abuse in the home. Family problems such as the abuse of alcohol and drugs by parents also place children at the risk of being street kids (Quarshie, 2011). Other researchers confirm that dysfunctionality within the family leads to children making a decision to prefer living on the streets than in the home. Issues of dysfunctionality include divorce; constant marital conflict which leads to children trying to be mediators between fighting parents; and poor or

harsh parenting skills (Sorre & Onio, 2013). Social workers should encourage parents to be involved in various preventing family strengthening programmes to prevent family problems which might lead to children going to the streets. Marriage preparation, marriage enrichment, fatherhood, single parent or parenting programmes assist parents with skills that increase family cohesion (Mujoko, 2012; Nyanhoto, 2017). These programmes are different in nature but have one goal of strengthening family bonds and ensuring family well-being.

The *micro system* can also be the child characteristics that affect the environment and people around. To integrate street children in new environments, social workers need to look at the micro-system factors such as physiological aspects, cognition, emotional being and personality of the child. The street child would have been exposed to trauma and losses. Therefore, interventions that focus on the micro level would foster care, healing, development of self and the building of relationships that were broken (Louw & Reineke, 2011).

The *mesosystem* refers to the relationship between the child and home, school and friends. It refers to the child's more generalised interactions among multiple micro systems. The size of the meso system can vary depending on the social surroundings of the child. This means that a set of micro systems make up the meso system. Children may opt to go and live on the streets because of dysfunctional meso systems such as school that has bullying and or corporal punishment, parents who are not interested in the child's school work or peers who are involved in drug abuse on the streets. Although corporal punishment is prohibited by law in South Africa, approximately one in five children experiences corporal punishment at school (UNICEF, 2011). A united mesosystem of high quality can contribute to possibilities of good development; but at the same time, a mesosystem of low quality can become a risk for the child. In an attempt to integrate street children, it is very important to make sure that the number and quality of the contacts in the child's mesosystem are sufficient in order to have proper child development (Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers, & Glassman, 2007). Microsystems that are well-interacted create a good mesosystem that offers better possibilities of development than one micro-system could offer. To help street children adapt to new environments, social workers should link systems such as school, family, friends and church. To integrate the street child on the mesosystem level, at school, the child should be regarded as a learner with special needs. The peer group of the street children is very important as it acts as a source of support and they have a sense of belonging through it. Therefore, the child needs to receive interventions which bring back the sense of belonging

(Louw & Reineke, 2011). New positive peer group can be formed at school or at church. Fostering recreational facilities such as sports grounds and clubs in disadvantaged communities might also help in keeping children off the streets.

The *exosystem* is comprised of environmental structures that the child is not directly in contact with, but still affect the child's development through interactions or influence from others. The *exo*system affects the child's interactions with the environment indirectly because it is in the broader context. Conditions in this system can affect the framing and content of the activities, roles and relations. This can include, for example, local politics, neighborhood characteristics, and the resources in the local society or the parents' working place (Algood, Hong, Gourdine, & Williams, 2011). If support systems are put in place, it stimulates quick adjustment and the child's development.

The *macrosystem* explains the conditions that the other systems in the model are in. It includes conditions in the society, policies, norms and values on a national level. It also considers different cultural aspects and ideologies that affect the individual. On a macro level, policies should be put in place to protect and fight for the reintegration of street children in new environments such as the school. An example of dysfunctional macro-system is the South African Department of Education's Inclusive model (2005) which focuses more on how to assist disabled children but does not focus much on the needs of street children in the education system. Social workers should use critical social work to practise in ways which promote social justice and ensure that the needs of the disadvantaged are addressed (Payne, 2015). The UNICEF report of (2014) states that in 2013, there were 49,550 reported child crime victims, with sexual offences contributing to almost half of the reported cases. Bhukuth and Ballet (2015) are of the view that abuse is one of greatest reasons children leave their homes for street living. Social workers need to challenge problems at the macrosystem level and contribute to the formation of policies that protect children to keep them off the streets. At the macro level, social workers should motivate and encourage partnerships of different stakeholders in providing solutions in implementing preventive services to reduce problems leading to children living on the streets. Social workers need to raise the awareness regarding living on the streets. The fact that a child is on the streets mean the child is vulnerable. Curricula on child protection need to provide social workers with innovative informational tools and resources that enable social work to be responsive and adaptive to protect children in such circumstance.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at exploring the circumstances of children living on the streets due to the serious challenges they face when they are out of parental or guardian care. Although they do have a human right to be protected and to be safe as well as to have care and love from people such as parents and guardians, they are more vulnerable when they are living on the streets. Despite the country having attained Independence in 1994, and having passed attractive and commendable legislations and established many branches of Social Development, it appears the number of street children living on the streets remains a problem year in year out. Therefore, it is concluded that there is a lot that needs to be done from a multisystemic perspective and ecosystemic approach, with concerted efforts to ensure that these children are placed in alternative care that will keep them off the streets.

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