



North American Association of Christians in Social Work
A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work

PO Box 121
Botsford, CT 06404
www.nacsw.org
888.426.4712

**THE FORGOTTEN ONES: LIVING CONDITIONS AND SOCIAL
FUNCTIONING OF STREET CHILDREN IN PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI**

By: Dieuveut Gaity, MSW

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2011
October, 2011
Pittsburgh, PA**

The Forgotten Ones: Living Conditions and Social Functioning of Street Children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

By Dieuveut Gaity, MSW

Presented at NACSW Convention 2011

October, 2011

Pittsburgh, PA

Abstract

Many children around the world are living on the streets. This workshop will: 1) review definitions related to street children; 2) describe the living conditions and social functioning of street children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; and 3) offer specific recommendations for social workers in public, private, and religious spheres.

Presentation Description

Extreme poverty and social inequalities engender numerous social problems around the world. The street children phenomenon is one example that portrays the severity of socioeconomic shortcomings and political problems in developing countries, including Haiti. The tragic earthquake in 2010 intensified this problem even further, resulting in more orphaned children and even rougher living conditions for street involved children in Haiti.

This workshop will focus on three main areas. First, since the definitions used to describe street children vary considerably around the world, the workshop will start by reviewing different definitions surrounding street children (e.g. children of the street vs. children on/in the street, runaways, etc.), followed by a brief overview of the estimated number of children impacted by this issue around the world. Second, the author will provide a detailed overview of the living conditions of street children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti based on personal observations and interactions with some street children. The workshop will also address the impact that these living conditions can have on the social functioning of these children. Third, the workshop will conclude by highlighting numerous possibilities in which social workers can address the issues impacting street children through public, private, and religious spheres, both at the micro and macro levels.

Background and Definitions

The phenomenon of street children is very broad and complex. By exploring this phenomenon, researchers not only study the street children, but they also study the social context in which the phenomenon developed. In other words, they do not view the street children as an isolated phenomenon; instead, they emphasize its interrelation with the global environment, and with the society at a micro, mezzo and macro level (Ferguson, 2002). In this regards, the following are the main definitions that describe the context of street children. Based on the UNICEF's definition, there are two main categories. First, *the children on/in the street* "are those engaged in some kind of economic activity ranging from begging to vending. Most go home at the end of the day and contribute their earnings to their family. They may be attending school and retain a sense of belonging to a family. Because of the economic fragility of the family, these children may eventually opt for a permanent life on the streets." Second, *the children of the street*, "actually live on the street (or outside of a normal family environment). Family ties may exist but are tenuous and are maintained only casually or occasionally." (UNICEF, 2003).

Living Conditions and Social Functioning of Street Children in Haiti

The results of my research study show that the street children between 6 and 11 years old in Port-au-Prince, Haiti are living in physical, social, political and cultural conditions, which are full of risks, privations, and deleterious events that jeopardize their development. The physical, psychological, social and spiritual development of the street children is in some regards slower than in non-street children who are in permanent contact with their family, school, church, safe neighborhood, and so on. At several levels, such as school-related abilities, social skills, language acquisition, impulse and emotional control, and moral and spiritual growth, the street

children are underdeveloped and vulnerable. Despite these developmental limitations, the 6 to 11 year old street children develop appropriately in some areas, and acquire some skills and abilities which facilitate them to adapt and stay alive in the street. In this context, some researchers have demonstrated that the street children are highly developed in terms of coping skills, creativity and resilience vis-à-vis the adversity. In addition, they show great interest in doing something productive such as work, business group, and other form of income-generating activities. Early in their childhood, they develop the specific knowledge to look for help by developing important relationships with institutions and agencies in their social environment. Their spatial skills and visual and auditory discrimination are very well developed, and they develop their own meaning of family support/sharing (Orme & Seipel, 2007). Thus, this level of understanding enables me to grasp the idea that human being is constantly modified or shaped by his living conditions. This sentiment is also illustrated by the following quote:

(...) Human beings become what they are at any given moment not by their own free decisions, taken rationally and in full knowledge of conditions, but under the pressure of circumstances [living conditions] which delimit their range of choice and which also fix their objectives and the standards by which they make (Ashford & LeCroy, 2010, p. 16).

The above quote has not only underlined that the behaviors of the individual are currently determined by his or her living conditions, but it also showed how those living conditions can limit the individual's choice and objectives. In this regard, the street children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, once involved in those living conditions, are more likely to reproduce the same conditions through their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, because their social, psychological, spiritual growth, and more specifically, their personality, was constructed in this environment (Bourdieu, 1970).

Implications for Social Workers

- 1- Advocate and influence the social welfare system and policy in Haiti
- 2- Address precipitating factors that generate the street children phenomenon.
- 3- Emphasize community development and family empowerment, especially in the rural areas. Specific projects need to be implemented to provide educational, health and spiritual support to the rural families.
- 4- Focus on “street-children problem” not “street children” (Ferguson, 2005)
- 5- Focus on evidence-based practice: Research, document, evaluate, and disseminate successful programs that are culturally sensitive and fit the indigenous beliefs, as well as the social and cultural values of the populations, especially families in both rural and urban areas.

Alternatives Interventions

- 1- Feeding program: to meet at least the basic needs
- 2- Medical services: at least education on health and risks
- 3- Legal assistance
- 4- Religious and spiritual support/out-reach to the street children
- 5- Street education
- 6- Financial services: banking and entrepreneur programs
- 7- Family reunification

- 8- Drop-in centers/night shelters
- 9- Outreach programs designed to bring the children into closer contact with agencies (Dybicz, 2005)

Bibliography

Ashford, B. J., & LeCroy, C.W. (2010). *Human behavior in the social environment: A multidimensional perspective (4th Ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Bourdieu, P. (1970). *La Reproduction*. Paris: Minuit

Dybicz, P. (2005). Intervention for street children: An analysis of best practices. *International Social Work, 48*(6), 763-771.

Ferguson, K. (2002). Inter-regional assessment of structural influences of the street-children phenomenon in Latin America: The Case of Brazil and Mexico. *Social Development Issues, 24* (2), 23-32.

Ferguson, K. (2005). Child labor and social capital in the mezzo system: Family- and community-based risk and protective factors for street-working children in Mexico. *Journal of Social Work Research and Evaluation: An International Publication, 6*(1), 101-120.

Ferguson, K. (2006). Towards social development policies for child street workers in Mexico. *Social Development Issues, 28*(1), 34-52.

Orme, J., & Seipel, M. O. (2007). Survival strategies of street children in Ghana: A qualitative study. *International Social Work, 54*(4), 492-496.

Phelps, H. A., & Henderson, D. (1952). *Contemporary social problems (4th Ed.)*. New York:
Prentice-Hall, Inc.