Title

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF PARENTING IN THE RISE OF STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN IN LILONGWE, MALAWI

Author

LINDIWE KAUNDA
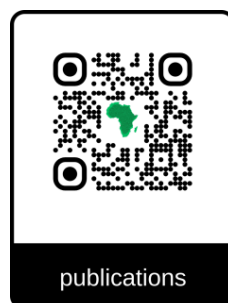
Co-Author

MR JUSTIN MAKAMO

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of street-connected children remains a persistent social challenge in Malawi, particularly in urban centers such as Lilongwe. While poverty, urbanization, and economic inequality are widely recognized contributors, the role of parenting in influencing children's transition to street life has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This study examines how parenting practices, family dynamics, and caregiver-child relationships contribute to the rise of street-connected children in Lilongwe, Malawi. Guided by a socio-ecological framework, the research explores how inadequate parental care, lack of supervision, and family breakdown shape children's vulnerability to street life.

The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with street-connected children, parents or guardians, social workers, and community leaders. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to parenting behaviors and household environments. Findings reveal that harsh parenting practices, domestic violence, abuse and the inability of parents to meet children's basic needs significantly influence children's decisions to leave home. Additionally, the absence of emotional support and positive parental engagement emerged as critical factors pushing children toward the streets and peer support.

The study further highlights that parenting challenges are often intertwined with broader structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to social services, which constrain caregivers' capacity to provide adequate care. The research concludes that addressing the issue of street-connected children requires interventions that go beyond economic support to include parenting education, family strengthening programs, and community-based child protection mechanisms. By emphasizing the central role of parenting, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the root causes of street-connectedness and provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and social service providers working to promote child welfare in urban Malawi.

Keywords: Parenting practices, Street youth, Family dynamics, Child neglect, Urban poverty, Child welfare.

INTRODUCTION

Street-connected children represent a growing social concern in many urban areas of developing countries, reflecting deep-rooted challenges related to poverty, family instability, and social exclusion. These children, who live or work on the streets either temporarily or permanently, are exposed to numerous risks including violence, exploitation, health problems, and limited access to education. In sub-Saharan Africa, rapid urbanization and economic hardship have intensified the presence of street-connected children, making it a critical child protection and social development issue. In urban centers such as Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi, the visibility of street- connected children has increased over recent years. While structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, rural–urban migration, and inadequate social services are often cited as primary causes, the family environment particularly parenting plays a crucial role in shaping children's pathways to the streets. The family is the primary social unit responsible for child upbringing, protection, and socialization. When parenting fails to provide adequate care, guidance, and emotional support, children may become vulnerable to seeking survival and belonging outside the home environment.

Background

Street-connected children are a global social concern, particularly in developing countries where economic hardship, social inequality, and weak child protection systems persist. These children either live on the streets full-time or spend a significant portion of their time there while maintaining limited or no contact with their families. Life on the streets exposes children to numerous risks, including violence, exploitation, substance abuse, poor health, and lack of access to education, all of which threaten their overall wellbeing and future prospects.

While poverty is often identified as the primary driver of street-connectedness, family-related factors play a critical role in shaping children's experiences and decisions. The family is the first and most influential environment for a child's physical, emotional, and social development. When families are unable to provide adequate care, protection, and guidance, children may become vulnerable to leaving home and seeking survival on the streets. Parenting practices, therefore, are central to understanding why some children become street-connected while others in similar economic conditions do not.

Context

In many urban settings, rapid urbanization, unemployment, and rising living costs place significant strain on families. Parents and caregivers facing economic and social stress may struggle to meet their children's basic needs or provide consistent supervision and emotional support. In such circumstances, negative parenting practices—including neglect, harsh discipline, domestic violence, and lack of parental involvement—may emerge. These conditions can create unsafe or unstable home environments, pushing children to seek refuge, autonomy, or income-generating opportunities on the streets.

Parenting challenges are often compounded by broader structural issues such as limited access to social services, inadequate parental education, substance abuse, and weakened community support systems. As a result, parenting cannot be viewed in isolation but rather as part of a complex interaction between household-level dynamics and wider social and economic pressures. Understanding this context is essential for developing effective interventions that address both family-related and structural causes of street-connectedness.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of parenting in the rise of street-connected children.

The specific objectives are to

- Explore parenting practices and family conditions experienced by street-connected children prior to leaving home.
- Examine how caregiver behaviors, such as neglect, abuse, lack of supervision, and limited emotional support, influence children's movement to the streets.
- Identify social and economic factors that affect parents' ability to provide adequate care and support for their children.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to generate evidence that can inform family- centered interventions, child protection strategies, and policies aimed at reducing the prevalence of street-connected children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Street-Connected Children

The term street-connected children refers to children for whom the street plays a central role in their daily lives and identities, whether as a place of work, residence, or social interaction *(UNICEF, 2005)*. Earlier literature used the term street children, often categorizing them as *"children of the street"* or *"children on the street" (Aptekar, 1994)*. However, contemporary scholarship favors the term street-connected children as it recognizes the fluid and dynamic relationships children maintain with their families, communities, and the street environment *(Thomas de Benítez, 2011)*. This shift emphasizes children's agency while acknowledging the structural and relational factors influencing their circumstances.

Research consistently shows that street-connected children face heightened risks, including physical and sexual abuse, substance use, health problems, and exclusion from education *(Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003; WHO, 2014)*. While these outcomes are well documented, scholars argue that understanding the pathways leading children to the streets is critical for developing preventive and sustainable interventions *(Beazley, 2015)*.

Global and Regional Perspectives on Street-Connectedness

Globally, the rise of street-connected children has been linked to poverty, rapid urbanization, migration, armed conflict, and weakening family structures *(UNICEF, 2012)*. In developing countries, urban centers attract families seeking economic opportunities, but limited employment prospects and inadequate housing often result in informal settlements and unstable living conditions *(Tacoli, 2012)*. Children growing up in such environments may be compelled to engage in street-based activities to supplement household income.

In sub-Saharan Africa, studies highlight that street-connectedness is not solely an economic issue but a complex social phenomenon influenced by cultural norms, family relationships, and community support systems *(Conticini & Hulme, 2007; Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2013)*. Although poverty creates vulnerability, not all children from poor households end up on the streets, suggesting that family-level factors—particularly parenting—play a mediating role *(Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2014)*.

Parenting and Child Development

Parenting is widely recognized as a critical determinant of child development and wellbeing. *Baumrind's (1967, 1991)* typology of parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—provides a foundational framework for understanding how parental behavior influences child outcomes. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and appropriate control, is associated with positive developmental outcomes, while neglectful and authoritarian styles are linked to behavioral problems and emotional distress.

Attachment theory further emphasizes the importance of caregiver-child relationships in shaping children's sense of security and belonging *(Bowlby, 1988)*. When children experience consistent care, emotional support, and protection, they are more likely to develop resilience. Conversely, insecure attachment resulting from neglect, abuse, or inconsistent parenting increases the likelihood of risk-taking behaviors and detachment from the family environment *(Ainsworth et al., 1978; Howe, 2011)*.

Parenting Practices and Pathways to Street Life

A growing body of literature identifies

negative parenting practices as significant push factors driving children to the streets. Studies conducted in various urban contexts show that children often leave home due to physical abuse, emotional neglect, harsh discipline, and lack of parental supervision *(Rizzini et al., 2007; Davies, 2008)*. For many children, the street represents an escape from violence and fear within the household rather than merely a search for income.

Research by *Aptekar (1994)* and later by *Panter-Brick (2002)* emphasizes that children's decisions to migrate to the streets are often rational responses to adverse family environments. In households where caregivers struggle with substance abuse, mental health challenges, or domestic violence, children may perceive the streets as offering greater autonomy and peer support. Similarly, family breakdown caused by divorce, death of parents, or remarriage has been linked to increased vulnerability to street-connectedness *(Veale, 2005)*.

Neglect, particularly the failure to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, and education, is another critical factor. Studies show that children who are repeatedly sent to work or beg on the streets by caregivers may gradually become detached from home and permanently connected to street life *(Conticini, 2010)*. This suggests that parenting decisions, even when driven by survival strategies, can unintentionally expose children to long-term harm.

Socioeconomic Stress and Parenting Capacity

While parenting practices are central, scholars caution against viewing caregivers solely as perpetrators of neglect or abuse. The ability of parents to provide adequate care is often constrained by broader socioeconomic conditions. *Conger et al. (2010)* argue that economic hardship increases parental stress, which in turn negatively affects parenting behaviors and family relationships. Chronic poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity can reduce caregivers' emotional availability and patience, leading to harsher or inconsistent parenting.

In many low-income urban contexts, limited access to social services, education, and mental health support further undermines parenting capacity *(UNICEF, 2016)*. Single-parent households and child-headed households are particularly vulnerable, as caregivers may lack both material and social support *(Evans, 2012)*. These findings highlight the interconnectedness of structural factors and parenting in shaping children's life trajectories.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Although substantial research has examined the causes and experiences of street-connected children, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature prioritizes economic and structural explanations, with relatively limited focus on the nuanced role of parenting and caregiver-child relationships. Second, many studies treat families as homogenous units, failing to explore variations in parenting practices within similar socioeconomic conditions. Third, there is a need for context-specific research that captures local cultural norms, family structures, and parenting expectations.

Addressing these gaps is essential for informing interventions that move beyond rescue and rehabilitation approaches to prevention and family strengthening. By focusing on parenting as both a risk and protective factor, research can contribute to more holistic and sustainable solutions to the issue of street-connected children.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the role of parenting in the rise of street-connected children. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to family life and parenting practices. Given the sensitive and complex nature of street-connectedness, qualitative methods enable the researcher to capture rich, contextualized data that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone. The design facilitated a deeper understanding of how parenting behaviors, family relationships, and household conditions influence children's movement to the streets.

The study was guided by a socio-ecological framework, which recognizes that children's lives are shaped by interactions between individual, family, community, and broader societal factors. This framework informed the selection of participants, data collection methods, and analysis by emphasizing the interconnectedness of parenting practices and structural conditions.

Study Area

The study was conducted in an urban setting characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and a visible presence of street-connected children. Urban environments provide a relevant context for this research due to the concentration of street-based economic activities, migration, and social inequality. The selected study area includes streets, markets, bus terminals, and surrounding communities where street-connected children are commonly found, as well as households and community institutions involved in child welfare and protection.

Study Population

The study population comprised multiple groups to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. These included:

- Street-connected children
- Parents or guardians of street-connected children
- Social workers and child protection officers
- Community leaders and representatives of non-governmental organizations working with vulnerable children.

Including diverse participants enabled data triangulation and provided multiple perspectives on parenting practices, family dynamics, and the factors contributing to street-connectedness.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to the study objectives. Street-connected children were selected based on their presence in identified street locations and their willingness to participate. Parents or guardians were identified through community networks, social workers, and organizations working with vulnerable families. Social workers, community leaders, and organizational representatives were selected based on their professional involvement in child welfare.

The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged. This approach ensured that the sample size was sufficient to capture diverse experiences while maintaining depth and quality of data.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with street-connected children and parents or guardians. This method allowed participants to freely express their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe key issues related to parenting, family relationships, and reasons for leaving home. Interview guides were developed in line with the research objectives and included open- ended questions on caregiving practices, discipline, emotional support, and household challenges.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted with street-connected children and, where appropriate, with parents or community members. These discussions encouraged interaction among participants and provided insights into shared experiences, social norms, and collective perceptions of parenting and street life. Focus groups also helped identify common patterns and differences across participants.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with social workers, child protection officers, and community leaders. These interviews provided expert perspectives on trends, systemic challenges, and existing interventions related to street-connected children and family support. Key informants also offered contextual information that complemented data from children and parents.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researcher sought permission from relevant authorities and community leaders. Participants were approached through established community networks and organizations working with street-connected children. Interviews and discussions were conducted in locations that ensured privacy, safety, and comfort for participants.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in a language familiar to participants and later translated into English where necessary. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and reflections during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

- Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative component of the study utilized thematic analysis and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns, categories and themes from participants responses, allowing for the systematic interpretation of shared experiences. Narrative analysis complemented this by examining the structure and meaning of participants personal stories, providing deeper insights into their lived experiences. Together, these methods ensured a rich and nuanced understanding of qualitative data

- Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative component was organized and analyzed using a spreadsheet tool, which

facilitated the systematic recording and calculation of responses. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages were computed and presented visually through bar charts and pie charts. These visualizations provided a clear overview of the statistical trends and distributions, enhancing the reader's understanding of the quantitative findings and supporting qualitative insights.

By combining qualitative thematic and narrative analysis with quantitative visualization, the study achieved a triangulation perspective, ensuring both depth and breadth in addressing the research questions. The qualitative analysis illuminated the experiences and perceptions of participants, while the quantitative charts offered a concise summary of measurable trends, making the findings more accessible and interpretable.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study on the role of parenting in the rise of street- connected children. Data were analyzed thematically, and several interrelated themes emerged from interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. The results reflect the lived experiences of street-connected children, parents or guardians, and professionals working in child welfare. The major themes include inadequate parental provision, harsh and abusive parenting practices, lack of emotional support and supervision, family breakdown, and the influence of socioeconomic stress on parenting capacity.

Inadequate Provision of Basic Needs

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data was the inability of parents or guardians to adequately provide for children's basic needs. Many street-connected children reported leaving home due to persistent shortages of food, clothing, school materials, and medical care. Participants described situations where households frequently experienced hunger, forcing children to seek food or income outside the home.

Several children indicated that their involvement in street activities initially began as a survival strategy to support their families. Over time, however, prolonged exposure to street life weakened their attachment to home, eventually resulting in permanent street-connectedness. Some parents and guardians acknowledged their inability to meet basic needs, citing unemployment, low income, and rising living costs as major challenges. These findings suggest that inadequate provision, while rooted in poverty, directly influenced children's decisions to spend increasing amounts of time on the streets.

Harsh Discipline and Physical Abuse

Harsh parenting practices, particularly physical punishment and verbal abuse, emerged as a significant push factor. Many street-connected children recounted experiences of frequent beatings, insults, and threats by parents or caregivers. In several cases, children described punishment as excessive and disproportionate, often occurring in response to minor mistakes or failure to contribute financially to the household.

Children reported that fear of punishment made home environments unsafe and emotionally distressing. As a result, the streets were perceived as spaces of relative freedom compared to violent households. Parents and guardians, on the other hand, often justified harsh discipline as a culturally accepted method of correcting behavior or instilling respect. However, key informants noted that excessive punishment contributed to children's withdrawal from family life and increased their likelihood of running away.

Emotional Neglect and Lack of Parental Support

Another major finding was the lack of emotional support and positive engagement between parents and children. Many street-connected children expressed feelings of neglect, rejection, and lack of care from their caregivers. Participants described relationships characterized by minimal communication, absence of affection, and lack of encouragement.

Some children reported that parents were emotionally unavailable due to stress, substance abuse, or preoccupation with daily survival. As a result, children felt unvalued and disconnected from their families. In contrast, peer relationships on the streets provided a sense of belonging, understanding, and mutual support. This emotional attachment to street-based peer groups reinforced children's continued presence on the streets and reduced their motivation to return home.

Lack of Parental Supervision and Guidance

The absence of adequate parental supervision emerged as another critical theme. Several parents and guardians reported spending long hours away from home in search of income, leaving children unsupervised for extended periods. In such circumstances, children were exposed to negative influences, including street-based peer pressure, substance use, and risky behaviors.

Street-connected children described having significant autonomy at a young age, often making decisions about their daily activities without adult guidance. This lack of supervision allowed children to gradually integrate into street life without immediate parental intervention. Key informants emphasized that weak supervision not only increased children's exposure to street environments but also reduced parents' ability to monitor behavioral changes and intervene early.

Family Conflict and Breakdown

Family conflict and breakdown were frequently reported as contributing factors to street- connectedness. Children from households experiencing persistent conflict, domestic violence, separation, or remarriage described unstable living conditions that made home life stressful and unpredictable. In some cases, children reported feeling unwelcome in households where stepparents or extended family members assumed caregiving roles.

Orphan hood and parental illness also contributed to family instability. Children who lost one or both parents often faced neglect or mistreatment by alternative caregivers, increasing their vulnerability to street life. Parents and community leaders acknowledged that family breakdown weakened traditional support systems and reduced accountability for child care, making it easier for children to drift to the streets unnoticed.

Substance Abuse within the Household

Substance abuse by parents or guardians emerged as a cross-cutting issue affecting multiple aspects of parenting. Children and key informants reported that alcohol and drug use by caregivers contributed to neglect, violence, and misuse of household resources. In households affected by substance abuse, income was often diverted away from basic needs, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity.

Children described feeling unsafe and neglected in such environments, particularly when caregivers became aggressive or irresponsible under the influence of substances. Substance abuse also reduced caregivers' emotional availability and capacity to supervise children effectively, increasing the

likelihood of children seeking refuge on the streets.

Socioeconomic Stress and Parenting Capacity

The findings revealed that parenting challenges were deeply intertwined with broader socioeconomic pressures. Parents and guardians consistently cited poverty, unemployment, and lack of social support as major constraints on their ability to provide care and supervision. Economic stress contributed to frustration, emotional exhaustion, and conflict within households, which in turn affected parenting behaviors.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of parenting in the rise of street-connected children. The results demonstrate that inadequate provision of basic needs, harsh and abusive parenting, emotional neglect, lack of supervision, family conflict, substance abuse, and socioeconomic stress are key factors influencing children's movement to the streets. These findings are consistent with previous research while also providing nuanced insights into how family-level dynamics interact with structural conditions.

Inadequate Provision and Economic Pressures

The study revealed that insufficient provision of food, clothing, school materials, and healthcare was a major push factor for children to leave home. Children frequently described leaving to meet their basic survival needs, highlighting the interplay between poverty and parenting capacity. This aligns with findings by *Conticini and Hulme (2007),* who noted

that while poverty is a critical driver of street-connectedness, it is not the sole determinant; the ability of parents to adequately care for their children is equally important. Parents in this study acknowledged their limitations, citing unemployment and low income, suggesting that economic hardship constrains parental capacity, sometimes resulting in unintentional neglect.

While economic factors are widely discussed in the literature *(UNICEF, 2012),* this study emphasizes that even within low-income households, children are not uniformly street-connected. Differences in parenting practices, emotional support, and supervision play a mediating role, explaining why some children remain at home despite material hardship. This underscores the importance of interventions that support both economic needs and parenting skills.

Harsh Discipline and Emotional Neglect

The prevalence of harsh disciplinary practices and emotional neglect in this study reflects earlier research on the impact of parenting styles on child outcomes *(Baumrind, 1991; Aptekar, 1994).* Excessive physical punishment and verbal abuse created home environments that were physically unsafe and emotionally distressing, prompting children to seek refuge on the streets. Emotional neglect, characterized by a lack of affection, communication, and encouragement, further weakened children's attachment to caregivers. The results support attachment theory, which posits that children require consistent emotional support to develop a sense of security and resilience *(Bowlby, 1988; Howe, 2011).* Without these, children may turn to alternative sources of emotional sustenance, such as peers on the street.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that harsh discipline and neglect are often

intertwined with cultural norms and socioeconomic stress. Some parents justified corporal punishment as an acceptable form of behavior correction, while stress from poverty and unemployment exacerbated emotional unavailability. These findings suggest that interventions should address both behavioral and structural factors, including parenting education and psychosocial support.

Lack of Supervision and Family Breakdown

Limited parental supervision emerged as a significant factor in children's street involvement. Parents' extended absences due to work or other responsibilities left children unsupervised, exposing them to street-based peer influence and risky behaviors. Similar findings were reported by *Rizzini et al. (2007)*, who noted that unsupervised children are more vulnerable to street life. The study also found that family breakdown, including domestic violence, parental separation, orphanhood, and remarriage, contributed to instability and insecurity. These factors created environments where children felt unwelcome or unsafe, aligning with research by *Veale (2005) and Davies (2008)* that emphasizes family dysfunction as a predictor of street-connectedness.

This study extends prior work by showing that supervision and family stability are closely connected; children in conflicted or fragmented households often experience both emotional neglect and lack of monitoring, amplifying the risk of leaving home. These insights point to the need for family-strengthening interventions that enhance supervision, communication, and conflict resolution.

Substance Abuse and Parenting Capacity

The findings revealed that parental substance abuse exacerbates neglect, violence, and household instability. Children exposed to caregivers' alcohol or drug use reported feelings of insecurity and neglect. This supports studies by *Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014) and Panter-Brick (2002),* which found that substance abuse reduces parental responsiveness and impairs child protection. Furthermore, substance abuse was linked to economic mismanagement, further limiting the resources available to children and increasing dependence on the street for survival.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing caregiver vulnerabilities alongside child- focused interventions. Programs targeting street-connected children should integrate parental substance abuse counseling, stress management, and community support to improve family functioning.

Socioeconomic Stress and Contextual Factors

Socioeconomic stress emerged as a cross-cutting factor affecting parenting capacity. Parents reported that poverty, unemployment, and limited social support constrained their ability to provide adequate care, supervision, and guidance. This is consistent with *Conger et al. (2010),* who emphasized that economic hardship increases parental stress and negatively influences parenting behaviors. Structural conditions, such as limited access to social services and educational support, compounded these challenges, suggesting that street-connectedness cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual family dysfunction.

The study's findings reinforce a socio-ecological perspective, which emphasizes that child outcomes result from the interaction between individual, family, and societal factors *(Bronfenbrenner, 1979).* While parenting practices directly influence children's attachment and

behavior, broader social and economic conditions shape the context in which these practices occur. This underscores the importance of integrated interventions that address both family-level parenting and structural poverty.

Children's Perception of the Street

An important insight from this study is how children perceive the street as an alternative space offering autonomy, peer support, and income opportunities. While the street exposes children to numerous risks, it also provides emotional and social resources absent at home. Peer networks reinforce survival strategies and contribute to prolonged street attachment. This finding aligns with *Beazley (2015),* who emphasizes children's agency in choosing street life as a rational response to adverse family circumstances. Recognizing this perspective is critical for designing interventions that consider children's needs for autonomy, belonging, and support.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of parenting in the rise of street-connected children. The findings indicate that parenting practices and family dynamics are central to understanding why children leave home and become street-connected. Key factors identified include inadequate provision of basic needs, harsh discipline and abuse, emotional neglect, lack of supervision, family conflict and breakdown, and parental substance abuse. These issues were compounded by broader socioeconomic stressors such as poverty, unemployment, and limited social support, which constrained caregivers' ability to provide adequate care. The study also highlighted children's agency, showing that the street is often perceived as an alternative space offering autonomy, peer support, and opportunities for survival. While street involvement exposes children to numerous risks, it also provides emotional and social resources absent at home, suggesting that interventions must consider children's perspectives and needs.

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