

Street Children

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the worldwide problem of abuse and violence of children living on the streets. These children are exceptionally vulnerable and are often exploited and made outcasts of society.

Evgenia Berezina is Senior Executive Assistant at Youth Advocate Program International in Washington, D.C.. She is also a Fulbright Fellow on violence and discrimination issues.



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Victimization and Abuse of Street Children Worldwide

by Evgenia Berezina

They are dirty, scared, bitter, worn out and helpless; these little street survivors grow up much too soon and die much too young. They upset our consciousness and disrupt the comforting illusion of public well-being. They are children. And, they are assaulted, tortured, and killed everyday.

According to recent UN data, there are nearly 150 million street children in the world today, and the number is rising daily. That means nearly one of every 60 people living on the planet is a child living on the streets. Half of them die within first four years of their street life. In other words, a child who ends up in the street at age 8 has a 50% chance of dying before the age of 12.¹

There are many unfortunate incidents which cause children as young as 3 years old to end up on the streets. The vast majority of these children have been abused and abandoned by their own families. In Guatemala, for instance, 64% of street girls interviewed by *Human Rights Watch* turned out to be victims of incest.² Other reasons include extreme poverty of a family, death of parents, unstable socio-economic situation in the country, and armed conflicts that cause many people to flee their homes, therefore instigating many families to fall apart.

Once on the street, children must resort to begging, robbery, and even prostitution in order to survive. Many join gangs where they are introduced to crime, violence, and drugs. They become addicted to inhaling glue, paint thinner, and/or other toxic substances destroying brain cells and organ tissues. Street educators in Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Russia, and other countries regularly find numerous grossly intoxicated kids as young as 6 years old trying to escape the pain, hunger, and desolation of street life in the poisonous fumes.

Neglected by society and government, street children are deprived of education, proper nutrition, and medical care. They suffer and die from various, often easily treatable, diseases such as head lice, skin parasites, pneumonia, tuberculosis and a host of sexually transmitted diseases, including, yet not limited to, gonorrhea, syphilis and AIDS. Because of the grave lack of outreach and shelter programs, street children often have no place to go and no one from whom they can seek help and protection.

Protection is what these street children desperately need because they are prime targets of disturbed, exploitive adults. Child murderers, angry shopkeepers, and pedophiles are a daily threat to the safety and lives of desperate street children.

Sexual exploitation of street children by locals and foreigners alike is widespread. For example, a Swiss couple, William and Lily Marti, was arrested in Bombay in 2003 for taking pictures of 8 and 9 year old children in exchange for money. The couple was also accused of kidnapping, molesting, and sexually abusing street children throughout India.³ Similarly, in 2004, Stephan Irving, a 56 year-old pediatrician from New York was prosecuted for traveling to Mexico to visit places like Castillo Vista del Mar hotel, which provides shelter and food to street children as young as 6, in exchange for sexual activities.⁴ However, it is important to note that exploitation is rarely reported.

Many believe the most serious threat to street children comes from the very people responsible for their safety and protection – local governmental and law enforcement officials. Unfortunately, police brutality and corruption is common worldwide, and is especially widespread in developing countries with large populations of street children. Unspeakable police brutality reflects the governments' perception of street children as parasites to be exterminated, rather than as children needing homes and nurturing. A growing number of politicians inaccurately blame increasing levels of violent crime on children and teens, instead of looking at the actual numbers of street children who are victimized or murdered on a regular basis by official security forces.⁵

Police overwhelmingly view and treat these street children as sub-human; unworthy of basic human rights. While it is true that street children are sometimes involved in petty theft, drug-trafficking,

and other criminal activities, the police often assume that violence and brutality are the only means of dealing with this problem. They unjustifiably see a hardened criminal in every street child. For the police and other security forces, street children represent easy and silent targets. They are young, small, poor, ignorant of their rights, and often have no family or advocates who will come to their defense. It does not require much time or effort to detain and torture a child to coerce a confession, and street children are unlikely to register formal complaints.⁶

Latin American countries are especially notorious for their vicious and sadistic practices against street children. Death squads and armed police forces regularly comb the city streets to perform savage "social cleansings". In Honduras, brutal murders of street kids by government forces reached such high levels that it led to an international scandal in 2001. The UN appointed a Special Rapporteur to investigate hundreds of extrajudicial executions of street children throughout the country. Numerous witnesses saw armed men in civilian clothes that drove around in unmarked vehicles and had, on several occasions, forcibly abducted street children. Often their dead bodies were found in deserted areas outside the city limits. The children appear to have been tortured before being shot in the head, execution-style. Police, meanwhile, demonstrated an alarming lack of concern with the situation, and, at times actively covered up the crimes, including failing to record and investigate the murders, and quietly disposing of evidence.⁷

Police actions are informally sanctioned by high ranking governmental officials. For example, the Minister for Public Security of Honduras denied any police involvement in the killing of any street child. The children, according to him, were "out of their minds" and not to be trusted. His point of view was fully supported by the country's Human Rights Commissioner, whose son [Rodrigo Valladares Pineda] incidentally, was arrested in November 2000 for attacking a 10 year old street boy and poking a lit cigarette in his eye.⁸

Arbitrary detention of street children is also a common practice, even though it grossly violates international and domestic laws.⁹ Law enforcement and government authorities often try to justify

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roundups or prolonged detention of street children as means of identifying them and re-uniting them with their families. Neither the manner of the arrests or the lack of actual re-unification attempts reflects this law enforcement “justification”. In fact, many street children often have no family to claim them. Meanwhile, they are held in deplorable conditions. In some instances, the police beat detained street children claiming that it is a method of crime prevention. In Bulgaria, for example, children who have been held in lock-ups reported that they were beaten by police with electric shock batons, clubs, chains, rubber hosing, boxing gloves, and a metal rod with a ball at the end.¹ In Paraguay, police practiced interrogation of street children by placing plastic bags over their heads while they proceeded to kick and hit their bodies, especially the testicles and the back. Police are known to place pins under the children’s fingernails and give them electric shocks.² The hypocrisy of the authorities is most evident if one considers that the police are especially active in “cleaning up” the streets at times of major events that attract close national and international attention. The children are arrested on vague or false charges, sometimes just for being homeless or for begging. Brute force and obscene language are used in abundance by police during roundups that frequently happen at night, in order to avoid public witnesses and political condemnation. Many street children have described being grabbed, kicked, hit, whipped, caned, and/or clubbed while being held in police custody.¹⁰

Security forces have also been known to abuse and exploit street children for personal gain. One commonly reported practice is for the police to extort money or services from the children by threatening to imprison them if they refuse to pay. A Kenyan street boy shared his experience with *Human Rights Watch*: “We usually carry sacks (for garbage picking). The police beat us up and put us in our sacks. Even if we’re just walking around, doing nothing. If you don’t give them money, they take you to the station... They search us. If we have money, they take it.”¹¹ A Guatemalan street child said, “...they take you down to the station and make you clean it - they say they’ll arrest you if you don’t. On the street and also at the station;

they’ll hit us in front of the other police. Also they step on our hands with the heels of their boots and press down hard and twist.”¹²

Girls living on the streets are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse from security forces that sometimes coerce street girls into sexual acts in exchange for their freedom. In extreme cases, police will blatantly rape girls and threaten to kill or maim them if they report the abuse.

From police custody, the children may be sent before a juvenile court which often places them in special institutions called “remands”, or juvenile homes. The remands are mostly degenerated into jail-like custodial centers. Many children sent to such homes in India and Latin America have died as a result of severe beatings and torture performed either by the staff or by older children.³

Few advocates, lawyers, or prosecutors speak up for these abused children who rarely have the financial resources to pay legal fees. Family members willing to intervene usually have financial constraints of their own. The street children’s stories remain untold, and their lives are often neglected and forgotten.

Widespread impunity allows violence against street children to continue. Casa Alianza in Latin America files hundreds of criminal complaints on behalf of street children each year, but only a handful result in prosecution. Almost always when an investigation is ordered, it is done by the police themselves, and in some cases, by members of the same department, station, or remand house staff in which the alleged abuse occurred.

Adding to the police brutality is the cruelty and indifference of society as a whole, which has turned its eyes and hearts away from the children of the street. In Bulgaria street children of Roma (gypsy) ancestry are often attacked and viciously beaten by skinhead gangs armed with bats, chains, knives, steel capped boots, and gas guns.¹³ In Guatemala, street children are often murdered when they fall asleep in public places. Casa Alianza’s reports that a homeless boy was killed by three unidentified civilians who covered the boy’s head with a cloth as he slept then crushed his skull with a concrete block. The shocking ruthlessness of the murders and abuse, and the fact that there has been so little

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public outcry, seems to illustrate the general disregard for street children by the public.

Street children desperately need programs and services. Unfortunately, there are relatively few shelters or outreach programs anywhere in the world. And the ones that do exist, like at Casa Alianza, struggle daily for justice and the recognition of the human rights of street children. Governments need stronger enforcement measures and international penalties for non-compliance. Police must be made accountable for their crimes against homeless and poor children. There is much to be done.

These are only a few of the ideas that are needed to make a difference; there are countless others. One of the most important things that can be done is to become aware and educated on the issue, then to inform those around you. You may be surprised at just how few people will know anything about street children, and equally surprised at how many people may be willing to help you in your efforts to educate people about one of the largest groups of vulnerable children in the world.

Footnotes

- 1 Repper Multi Media Company (http://www.street-children.com/pages/uk/enfants_problemes.asp)
- 2 'Guatemala's Forgotten Children: Police Violence and Abuse in Detention', Human Rights Watch, 1997
- 3 'Swiss couple jailed over sexual abuse of street kids', March 30, 2003; smh.com.au
- 4 'Expeditariate Condemned For the Sexual Abuse of Street Children in Honduras and Mexico', February 17, 2004; Casa Alianza (<http://www.casa-alianza.org/EN/noticias/Imn/noticia849>)
- 5 World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), Casa Alianza
- 6 Human Rights Watch
- 7 'Mission to Honduras: Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions', Report of the Special Rapporteur, Ms. Asma Jahangir, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/36; source: Casa Alianza
- 8 'Latin America and the Caribbean Summit Turns Spotlight on Plight of Street Children', Financial Times (London), November 17, 2000; (http://pangaea.org/street_children/latin/ibero.htm)
- 9 Namely, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- 10 Human Rights Watch

- 11 'Juvenile Injustice: Police Abuse and Detention of Street Children in Kenya', Human Rights Watch, 1997
- 12 'Guatemala's Forgotten Children: Police Violence and Abuse in Detention', Human Rights Watch, 1997
- 13 'Children of Bulgaria: Police Violence and Arbitrary Confinement', Human Rights Watch, 1996
- 14 'Paraguay: torture of street children', OMCT
- 15 Human Rights Watch
- 13 'Children of Bulgaria: Police Violence and Arbitrary Confinement', Human Rights Watch, 1996

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