

Factors that Led Children's Exposure to Street Life Prior to their Admission in Rehabilitation Program in All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre, Kigali, Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Street children often experience multiple deprivations, including, neglect, abuse, poverty, and exposure to violence, which adversely affect their psychological, emotional, and social functioning. The objective of this study was to examine the factors that led to children's exposure to street life prior to their admission in All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre, Kigali, Rwanda. The study was anchored on Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1963) and Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1960) which provided a concrete foundation for understanding how social environments and individual factors interact to shape the psychosocial well-being of individuals. The target population was sixty-two (62) participants composed of fifty-four (54) street children going through rehabilitation process in All children Humanitarian Foundation Centre, Kigali, Rwanda, and two teachers, two caregivers, two counsellors, one priest and the dean of discipline. The study used a qualitative approach and a phenomenology design to explore the lived experiences of street children going through rehabilitation process in All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre, Kigali, Rwanda. Purposive sampling was employed to select respondents with relevant experiences and insights into the rehabilitation process. Data were collected using an interview guide and focus group discussions. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. The study found that poverty, family breakdown, abuse, neglect, and lack of emotional support were major factors leading children to street life, resulting in trauma, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social isolation. The findings also revealed that rehabilitation through counselling, education, basic needs provision, and supportive relationships improved the children's emotional well-being, self-confidence, resilience, and hope of future. The study recommended a holistic and child-centred rehabilitation approach that combines psychosocial support, professional counseling, regular follow-up, and family empowerment programs to promote the well-being and reintegration of street children.

Keywords: Factors, Street children, Rehabilitation, Psychosocial, Street life, Kigali, Rwanda

INTRODUCTION

Street children constitute a marginalized group in most societies. They do not have what society considers appropriate relationships with major institutions of childhood, such as family, education, and health. At the global level, several impressive efforts have been made to shed light on the critical issues affecting street children. These have included the problem of child labor, malnutrition, and sexual abuse through child prostitution (UNICEF, 2022). A report by WHO (2004) stated that as the global population is increasing, a similar pattern is noted among the increasing number of street children. Literature and statistics within the African context reported an alarming increase of over 10 million street children from approximately 100 million street children (UNICEF, 2023). According to Obidoa et al. (2015), "developed and developing countries widely acknowledge and recognize the phenomenon of street children."

In the United States, 83% of "street children" do not leave their state of origin. If they do leave their state of origin, they are likely to end up in large cities, notably New York City, Los Angeles, Portland, and San Francisco. In the United States, street children are predominantly Caucasian, female, and 42% identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Conticini and Hulme (2007) estimated that there were approximately 1,000 street children in the city of Bucharest. The prevalence of street children has led to a rapidly increasing sex tourism business in Romania; by 2024, it was estimated that less than 500 children lived permanently in the streets in Bucharest, while less than 1,500 worked in the streets during the day, returning home to their families in the evening.

According to Erbaydar, and Kutlu (2010), 88,000 children in Turkey live on the streets, and the country has the fourth-highest rate of underage substance abuse in the world. Four percent of all children in Turkey are subject to sexual abuse, with 70 percent of the victims being younger than 10. Contrary to popular belief, boys are subject to sexual abuse as frequently as girls. Street children in Ukraine are at high risk of HIV infection, police harassment, abuse, violence, and negative mental health outcomes. Efforts thus far have been through legislative, preventative, and rehabilitative endeavors by governmental and non-governmental organizations. An assessment of the Ukrainian Ministry of Health indicated that there are around 115,000 underage street children who need protection (Pace, 2012).

In African countries, an increasing number of children are being forced onto the streets as a result of poverty, abuse, torture, rape, abandonment, or being orphaned. In some countries emerging from conflicts or in conflicts, street children face a life of distress, with total lack of security; sleeping on the roadside at night with no access to shelter, food, and water, and suffering from severe malnutrition (Byrne, 1998). Sierra Leone was considered to be the poorest nation in the world. According to the UN World Poverty Index (2018), there are close to 50,000 children relying upon the streets for their survival, a portion of them living full-time on the streets. There are also an estimated 300,000 children in Sierra Leone without access to education.

In Kenya, it is estimated that more than half of its children live below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2022). Children struggle against malnutrition, diseases, prostitution, delinquency, homelessness, and negligence (Embleton et al. 2023). In Kenya, many children migrate to the streets due to poor family relationships, overcrowded living conditions, and financial constraints that limit access to education, prompting them to seek employment (Obidoa, 2015). According to Karabanow (2008), the yearly growth rate of the street children in Kenya stands at 10%, and the situation is getting worse. Street children exist as a group or alone on the absolute fringes of society, in a world where violence and repression reign. Successive estimates of the numbers indicate upwards of 40,000 street children live in Kenya today, with half of their population concentrated on major towns such as Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu (Aptekar and Stoecklin, 2014).

The number of street children in Kigali, Rwanda was estimated to be between 6,000 and 7,000 in 2022, and some of the root causes behind this phenomenon, highlighted in the Strategic plan for street children, are: the 1990-94 war and the 1994 genocide and related internal and external displacements, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and domestic violence (Mugambwa & Katusiimeh, 2018). In addition, other related causes have been identified, including double orphanhood; maltreatment by parents' spouses following the death of or separation from one parent; large family size; misunderstandings between parents; and parental irresponsibility in caring for their children. (Veale & Dona, 2003). Rwanda has adopted a rehabilitation and reintegration approach that integrates psychosocial support as a central component of care. Programs such as the Seruka Project implemented by SOS Children's Villages Rwanda emphasize trauma-informed counselling, structured group therapy, life skills education, family mediation, and educational reintegration (SOS Children's Villages Rwanda, 2021-2027). In Kigali, street children are exposed to a range of adversities that significantly undermine their psychosocial development. These children often live in unsafe, unstructured environments that lack the basic elements required for healthy development, such as stable relationships, education, and protection (Mugambwa & Katusiimeh, 2018).

Street children in Kigali, Rwanda, continue to represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Many children are exposed to street life at an early age due to a combination of poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, neglect, parental loss, school-related challenges, and peer influence. In search of survival, safety, or a

sense of belonging, these children often leave their homes and become exposed to harsh living conditions characterized by hunger, exploitation, substance abuse, violence, poor health, and limited access to education. Such experiences negatively affect their physical, emotional, social, and psychological development. Although the problem of street children has received considerable attention from government and non-governmental organizations in Rwanda, existing studies have largely focused on the socioeconomic conditions of street children and the challenges they face while living on the streets. Limited research has specifically examined the factors that lead children to become involved in street life before their admission into rehabilitation programs. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the family, social, economic, and environmental circumstances that contribute to children's exposure to street life. Understanding these pre-street experiences is essential for developing effective prevention strategies, strengthening child protection interventions, and improving rehabilitation services. Therefore, this study sought to examine the factors that led to children's exposure to street life prior to their admission into the rehabilitation program at All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre in Kigali, Rwanda.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach, and employed a phenomenological research design to examine the factors that led to the children's exposure to street life prior to their admission into the rehabilitation program in All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre, Kigali, Rwanda. Phenomenological research design is a qualitative approach that seeks to understand and describe the essence of individuals lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this approach, the researcher collected detailed narratives through methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups discussion, and thematic analysis to identify the core essence of the experience (Vagle, 2018).

Population of Study

The target population for the current study consisted of 62 participants drawn from the rehabilitation center. This included 54 children who are the primary beneficiaries of the program and eight key informants selected because of their direct involvement in the children's care and development. The key informants were two teachers, one priest, one staff member in charge of discipline, two counsellors, and two caregivers. The sample comprised 18 participants, including 10 children selected for Focus Group Discussions and 8 key informants consisting of 2 teachers, 2 counsellors, 2 caregivers, 1 priest, and 1 dean of discipline for interview. These participants were considered appropriate because they possess firsthand experiences and professional knowledge regarding the children's psychosocial well-being and rehabilitation process. Therefore, the combination of children and institutional staff provided comprehensive perspectives necessary for achieving the objective of the study.

Instruments of Measure

The study employed both interview guide and focus group discussion guide to collect data. According to Kothari (2019), "the interview method of collecting data involves presentation of oral-verbal stimuli and reply in terms of oral-verbal responses". The method of collecting information through personal interviews is usually conducted in a structured manner; therefore, such interviews are referred to as structured interviews. During the study, eight key informants participated in interviews to understand the factors that led to the children's exposure to street life prior to their admission into the rehabilitation program in All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre, Kigali, Rwanda.

In this study, focus group discussion was used in order to collect detailed and in-depth information about children's opinions in groups, to observe their attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences related to psychosocial well-being and street life. Parker and Tritter (2006) argued that focus group discussion is used in a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues under research. Focus group discussion aims to obtain data from a purposefully selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population. In this present study, ten children participated in a Focus Group Discussion

(FGD). This method allowed participants to interact freely, share ideas, and build on one another's responses, thereby providing rich and meaningful data. The use of an FGD was justified because it encouraged open communication, promoted participation, and helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the common challenges and needs of the children within a supportive group setting.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection is the systematic method of gathering data to answer research questions (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000). The present study comprised 18 participants, including 10 children selected for focus group discussion and 8 key informants selected for interviews, consisting of 2 teachers, 2 counsellors, 2 caregivers, 1 priest, and 1 dean of discipline. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. During focus group discussion with children, the researcher used the Kinyarwanda language to ensure that participants understood the questions clearly and expressed their views freely. The English language was used during interviews with key informants who were comfortable communicating in English and others were using Kinyarwanda language. The use of both languages helped the researcher to obtain detailed and accurate information from participants.

Data Analysis

According to Kumar (2006), analysis of data includes comparison of the outcomes of the various treatments upon the several groups and the making of a decision as to the achievement of the goals of research. For the current study, data collected from the 10 children through Focus Group Discussion and from the 8 key informants through interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy. Data was transcribed from audio into written form. The transcribed data in Kinyarwanda was then translated into English for analysis. The researcher carefully reviewed and organized the data according to the study objective. Thematic content analysis was used to identify common ideas, patterns, and themes emerging from participants' responses. Similar responses were grouped together into categories and interpreted based on the research question.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study showed that joint effect of multiple social, economic, and family factors led to the involvement of the children in street activity before the commencement of the intervention. The level of poverty in the community formed the core variable throughout the entire process, whereby children were forced to be homeless and end up on the streets since they could not provide for their necessities, including food, shelter, and even education. Besides, the children whose family background involved any form of neglect, abuse, or even death of one or both parents were prone to end up on the streets.

Life before Started Living on the Streets

The participants in FGD and in the interview highlight several key factors that contributed to the children's entry into street life. Themes developed: household poverty and unmet basic needs, family conflict and domestic violence, and parental neglect or absence. The participants in the interview and FGD highlight household poverty and unmet basic needs as primary drivers. Children described irregular access to food, inability to pay school fees, and the pressure of taking on adult responsibilities at a young age. As said by participant 1 in the FGD:

“Before I went to the streets, my life was full of struggle. There were many children at home, and my mother was the only one trying to provide for us. Some days we ate once, and other days we did not eat at all. I remember going to bed feeling hungry and thinking about what we would eat the next day. Even when I tried to focus in school, my stomach was empty, and I felt weak” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 15 from the interview emphasized that:

“Poverty is a key factor driving children to the streets. Due to extreme economic hardship, many families are unable to meet basic needs, forcing children to seek survival independently through activities like begging or

informal work. This deprivation exposes them to serious risks such as hunger, illness, and exploitation, while also trapping them in a cycle of vulnerability” (March 24, 2026).

The participants also said that family conflict and domestic violence were common experiences. The participants reported frequent shouting, fighting between parents, and physical abuse. The children described living in fear due to a parent’s substance abuse or aggressive behavior, which disrupted the sense of safety and stability at home. As illustrated by participant 2 from FGD:

For me, home did not feel peaceful. There was always shouting and fighting between my parents. Sometimes I would hide outside until late at night because I feared the noise and the anger. I did not feel safe. I felt like nobody noticed how scared I was (March 13, 2026).

Similarly, participant 5 in FGD said that:

My father used to drink a lot. When he was drunk, he became violent. Sometimes he beat my mother and even us. I lived in fear. I felt angry and helpless at the same time. I started spending more time outside the house to avoid the violence (March 13, 2026).

Participant 11 from the interview explains that:

“Parental conflicts disturb the children and push them to look for peace elsewhere.” Family instability is a significant factor contributing to children living on the streets. Frequent arguments, domestic violence, or separation between parents can create an unsafe and emotionally distressing home environment, causing children to feel neglected, anxious, or unwanted. In search of safety, stability, and emotional relief, some children choose to leave their homes and seek refuge on the streets, where they believe they may find freedom or escape from family tensions” (March 15, 2026).

Children who lived with relatives or step-parents often felt unwanted or burdened with excessive chores. They reported losing a parent or experiencing emotional unavailability, leaving them without guidance or emotional support. Such neglect contributed to feelings of insecurity and motivated children to leave home in search of care and attention elsewhere.

As shared by participant 7 in FGD, he emphasized that:

“My mother passed away, and after that, things changed. My stepmother did not treat me well. I felt neglected and sometimes insulted. I felt like there was no place for me in that home anymore” (March 13, 2026).

Similarly, participant 3 in FGD exemplified:

“I was living with relatives after my parents separated. I felt like a burden in that house. They reminded me that I was not their child. I was given more chores than the others, and sometimes I was blamed for things I did not do. Slowly, I began feeling unwanted” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 14 in the interview stated that:

Family death, poverty, violence, neglect... all these push children to the street. The loss of a parent or caregiver can leave children without emotional or financial support, while poverty limits access to basic needs such as food, shelter, and education. At the same time, exposure to violence or neglect within the household creates an unsafe and unstable environment, making the street appear as an alternative for survival. These combined challenges often overwhelm children, forcing them to seek independence at an early age, even though life on the streets exposes them to further hardship and vulnerability (March 10, 2026).

Reasons for leaving home and spending time on the streets

Responses from the participants in FGD and interviews highlighted multiple interrelated reasons that contributed to their decision to leave home and spend extended periods on the streets. The main themes that arise are

household adversity, school-related challenges, peer influence, and perceived freedom.

Participants highlighted that household difficulty was a dominant factor. The participants reported experiencing physical abuse, neglect, or emotional mistreatment at home. Children described being beaten by step-parents, being unfairly blamed for household problems, or feeling unloved and unwanted. Participants 8 and participant 2 in FGD:

“My stepfather beat me often. Even small mistakes led to punishment. One day, after being beaten badly, I ran away. I did not plan it, I just ran. I felt that anywhere else would be better than home” (March 13, 2026).

“I was tired of being blamed for everything that went wrong at home. Even when I was not responsible, I was punished. I felt misunderstood and unwanted, so I decided to leave” (March 13, 2026).

These ideas are strengthened by the observation of participant 13 from the interview, as indicated:

“Poverty is one of the main causes. Many families struggle to meet basic needs, which pushes children to search for food or money on the streets. Family conflict and domestic violence can force children to leave home in search of safety and independence. Some children go to the streets because they dropped out of school and begin following friends who already live there. The loss of parents or lack of proper care from guardians can also lead children to street life” (March 13, 2026).

Participants in FGD showed that school-related challenges contributed to leaving home. Participants indicated that the inability to pay school fees, repeated punishments, or shame from being sent home made school a stressful environment. The combination of educational obstacles and home pressures created a sense of failure and embarrassment, motivating children to disengage from formal education and seek alternative environments outside the home.

Participant 3 in FGD clarified that:

“School also pushed me away. I was sent home many times for not paying school fees. Each time I returned home, I was scolded. I felt ashamed and embarrassed. Eventually, I stopped going and began spending time in town” (March 13, 2026).

Participants said that peer influence and perceived freedom played a significant role. Children reported being encouraged by friends already on the streets, who portrayed street life as offering autonomy, freedom from strict rules, and opportunities to earn small amounts of money. The streets were perceived as a space where they could escape control and judgment, making street involvement appear more appealing than staying in an oppressive or restrictive household.

Peer influence also played a role. As suggested by participant 6

“I had friends who were already on the streets. They told me they could earn money, eat what they wanted, and live freely without strict rules. At that time, freedom sounded better than suffering at home” (March 13, 2026).

Also, participant 12 in the interview spoke about peer influences.

“Some children formed friendships with others who had already experienced neglect or difficult life situations, and these relationships pushed them towards living on the streets. When children started using drugs at an early age, they became aggressive and difficult to manage, which increased their chances of ending up on the streets” (March 16, 2026).

The challenges at home and at school that influenced your decision to live on the street

The participants highlight how challenges at home and school contributed to their decision to live on the streets. Three major themes developed: academic-related stress and school victimization, household neglect and poor

communication, and combined psychosocial pressures. The participants underlined that academic-related stress and school victimization were significant contributors. Children reported being mocked by peers for poor performance, wearing torn uniforms, or having inadequate resources. Teachers' punitive measures, such as punishment for sleeping in class or incomplete homework, often failed to consider underlying factors like fatigue from household responsibilities. These experiences generated feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and frustration, creating a sense that school was an unwelcoming environment.

Participant 4 in FGD said that:

“Yes, there were many challenges. At school, I was mocked because of my torn uniform and poor performance. Other students laughed at me. I felt small and useless” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 5 in FGD also revealed:

“Sometimes teachers punished me for sleeping in class, but I was tired because I had worked late helping my family. No one asked why I was tired” (March 13, 2026).

Similarly Participant 6 noted: “At home, there was no encouragement. When I failed exams, I was insulted instead of supported. I started believing I had no future in school” (March 13, 2026).

The participants declared household neglect and poor communication as a factor.

Participants described homes lacking emotional support, encouragement, or understanding. Failures at school were met with insults rather than guidance, and children frequently felt ignored or misunderstood by family members.

Participant 2 from FGD declared that:

“Communication was poor in my family. Nobody sat down to ask how I was feeling. I kept my pain inside until it became too heavy, and sometimes it felt easier to leave home than continue hiding my feelings” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 3 from FGD said that:

“The combination of hunger, punishment, rejection, and school pressure made the street look like an escape. I thought I could breathe more freely there than at home or in school” (March 13, 2026).

The participants in FGD and interview stressed that the psychosocial pressures from home and school made the street appear as an alternative. Hunger, punishment, rejection, and household responsibilities compounded the stress of academic pressures. Children reported that the streets offered a sense of freedom, escape from ridicule, and an opportunity to cope with emotional and material hardships outside their homes and schools.

Participant 8 in FGD said that:

“I was expected to do all the household chores after school. Sometimes I had no energy left to study. Teachers punished me for being late or not doing homework, which made me feel hopeless” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 9 in FGD shared about this pressure:

“There was pressure to perform well at school, but nobody at home helped me study. When I made mistakes, I was scolded. It felt like no one cared about my struggles” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 10 in FGD highlight:

“Both school and home were stressful. At school, friends laughed at me and called me names. At home, I had to sleep hungry sometimes. I thought life on the streets would at least give me freedom from all that pressure” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 16 in the interview declared that:

“Street children come from environments where abuse, neglect, or instability shape their early lives. These experiences often push them away from home and into survival on the streets, where access to education becomes limited or nonexistent” (March 23, 2026).

The impact of poverty, family relationships, and violence

The participants highlight the significant role of poverty, family relationships, and violence in pushing children toward street life. Themes identified were: economic hardship and unmet needs, family dysfunction and lack of emotional support, and exposure to violence and insecurity.

Economic hardship and unmet needs were central to children’s experiences. Participants reported persistent hunger, lack of school fees, and absence of basic resources, which created stress and tension within the household. Poverty not only limited access to education but also contributed to conflict among family members, leaving children feeling abandoned and unsupported. As highlighted by participant 6 in FGD:

“Poverty also affected my education. Without school materials and fees, I felt like we did not belong in school. Slowly, I disconnected” (March 13, 2026).

The same participant 1 in FGD said:

“Poverty made everything harder. When there is no money, there is stress. When there is stress, people become angry. That anger affected us children” (March 13, 2026).

Participants also said that family dysfunction and lack of emotional support strongly influenced street involvement. Children described broken relationships, neglect, harsh discipline, and absence of guidance or care. Several participants emphasized that they felt unloved, ignored, or rejected by caregivers, which eroded trust in adults and diminished their sense of belonging at home. Participant 4 from FGD started that:

“Broken family relationships made me feel unloved. I was not guided or corrected with care, only with harshness. That made me lose trust in adults” (March 13, 2026).

Participant 14 in the interview explained:

“The participants also mentioned the effects that dysfunctional families and a lack of emotional support had on their decision to get involved in street involvement, in which they were compelled to do so as an act of necessity rather than an actual choice. In light of this information, it is clear that a caregiver plays a major role in the lives of adolescents in that their actions influence how a child develops and grows emotionally and psychologically. If the emotional needs of a child are left unnoticed or unattended, he or she might end up seeking validation or support outside of his or her family” (March 10, 2026).

Participants shown exposure to violence and insecurity emerged as a critical factor. They recounted experiences of physical abuse, constant parental conflict, and a pervasive sense of fear. The streets were perceived as a safer alternative to a home environment characterized by harm and instability, even though life outside carried its own risks. Participant 5 in FGD said:

“If there had been peace, understanding, and enough food at home, I believe many of us would never have gone to the streets” (March 13, 2023).

Also, participant 9 in FGD noted:

“I’ve witnessed events in my household that cause me to feel unsafe when I’m merely living out my everyday life. Occasionally, verbal arguments exaggerate to physical arguments, and the timing of such incidents is unpredictable. As a result, one constantly feels on guard. Additionally, there have been times when I’ve been

physically injured, and such experiences are difficult to shake off. Consequently, living in such an environment instills the belief that no place is truly safe. There's always that underlying fear that something bad may happen at any time" (March 13, 2026).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study confirm that poverty, family breakdown, abuse, neglect, and parental substance abuse are major factors contributing to children's involvement in street life. These findings are consistent with Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014), who observed that economic hardship, family instability, neglect, and violence are among the most common pathways leading children to street involvement across different cultural contexts. In both cases, the absence of adequate family support and basic necessities increases children's vulnerability to psychosocial distress and social exclusion, highlighting the need for comprehensive interventions that address both economic and psychosocial needs. These findings are consistent with established literature on street children, which shows that family dysfunction plays a central role in children's involvement in street life. Studies have indicated that domestic violence, parental substance abuse, neglect, and family breakdown significantly increase the likelihood of children leaving home and living on the streets. Such unstable family environments reduce children's sense of safety, belonging, and emotional support, making them more vulnerable to street involvement. In addition, economic hardship and lack of adequate care further push children into survival strategies outside the home. Overall, these conditions highlight the importance of addressing both family functioning and socioeconomic challenges in interventions aimed at preventing and rehabilitating street-involved children (Embleton et al., 2013).

Data reveal that children are drawn to the street life by loss of loved ones, poverty, violence and high incidence of neglect. This finding supports Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1963), particularly the stage of "Industry vs. Inferiority" (ages 5–12) and "Identity vs. Role Confusion" (adolescence), in which children require consistent guidance, care, and emotional support from caregivers to develop a sense of competence, self-worth, and trust in social relationships. When these needs are unmet, as seen in this study, children may develop feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and confusion about their role in the family and society". Still in line with this theory, feeling incapable of succeeding academically and unsupported at home contributes to low self-esteem and social withdrawal, prompting children to disengage from school and seek alternative environments where they feel accepted and valued.

Other reasons for living on the street according to this study's findings, are academic related stress and school victimization, household neglect and poor communication, and combined psychosocial pressures. This is in line with Betancourt et al (2013), who found that children exposed to chronic stress, social exclusion, and a lack of supportive environments often develop low self-esteem, emotional distress, and a diminished sense of competence. In both cases, these negative experiences erode the child's confidence and sense of belonging, making formal institutions like school feel unwelcoming and increasing the likelihood of withdrawal and eventual movement toward alternative environments such as street life. Findings are also supported by Masten (2014), according to whom children who grow up in environments lacking positive relationships, guidance, and emotional responsiveness are at higher risk of developing internalized distress, low self-worth, and reduced resilience. In both cases, the breakdown of supportive family interactions contributes to emotional insecurity and a perception of the home as an unsupportive space, increasing the likelihood that children may withdraw and seek belonging and understanding outside the family environment, including on the streets.

Children reported that the streets offered a sense of freedom, escape from ridicule, and an opportunity to cope with emotional and material hardships outside their homes and schools. These ideas were strengthened by the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson (1963), children in the "Industry vs. Inferiority" stage require supportive environments to develop competence, confidence, and a sense of achievement, while adolescents in the "Identity vs. Role Confusion" stage need stability and guidance to form a clear sense of self. When children are exposed to constant criticism, neglect, and unmet basic needs, they are likely to develop feelings of inferiority, low self-worth, and confusion about their role in society.

In line with the study of Panter-Brick (2002), participants highlighted the significant role of poverty, family relationships, and violence in their decision to have a street life. In both cases, material deprivation is not only an economic issue but also a psychosocial one, as it contributes to fear, instability, and a lack of supportive relationships, ultimately pushing children to seek alternative coping environments such as the streets. Importantly, the findings show that these prestreet experiences have long-term psychological effects, including trauma, mistrust, and difficulties in forming relationships. In line with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, children's behaviors and coping strategies are shaped by their past environments and learned experiences. This highlights the need for rehabilitation programs to address not only current needs but also the deep-rooted psychological impacts of these early experiences.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important practical implications for rehabilitation centers, families, schools, policymakers, social workers, counselors, and child protection organizations working with street children.

First, the study revealed that poverty is a major factor contributing to children's exposure to street life. This suggests the need for government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations to strengthen family economic empowerment programs through income-generating activities, vocational training, social protection schemes, and financial support for vulnerable households. Addressing household poverty can reduce the likelihood of children leaving home in search of survival on the streets.

Second, the findings showed that family conflict, domestic violence, neglect, and parental absence significantly contribute to children's movement into street life. Therefore, family strengthening interventions should be integrated into child protection programs. Parenting education, family counseling, mediation services, and community awareness campaigns can help improve family relationships and create safer home environments for children.

Third, the study found that school-related challenges, including inability to pay school fees, school victimization, poor academic performance, and lack of support, influenced children's decisions to leave home. Educational stakeholders should establish mechanisms to identify and support at-risk children through school counseling services, mentorship programs, anti-bullying initiatives, and educational assistance to prevent school dropout and street involvement.

Fourth, the findings demonstrated that children who experienced abuse, neglect, violence, and loss of caregivers often developed trauma, low self-esteem, mistrust, and emotional distress. Rehabilitation centers should therefore adopt trauma-informed and child-centered approaches that prioritize psychological healing, professional counseling, emotional support, and resilience-building activities alongside the provision of basic needs.

Fifth, the study highlighted the influence of peers and the perception of street life as a source of freedom and belonging. This underscores the importance of providing positive peer support networks, mentorship opportunities, life skills training, and recreational programs that promote healthy social relationships and positive behavioral development among vulnerable children.

Sixth, the findings support the relevance of Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory in understanding children's experiences. Practitioners working with street children should create supportive environments that promote positive identity formation, self-efficacy, social learning, and healthy interpersonal relationships during rehabilitation and reintegration.

Finally, policymakers should strengthen child protection policies and early intervention systems that identify children at risk of street involvement before they leave home. Collaboration among families, schools, local authorities, religious institutions, and child welfare organizations is essential to provide comprehensive support that prevents street migration and promotes successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Overall, the study emphasizes that preventing and addressing street children's challenges requires a holistic approach that combines economic support, family strengthening, educational assistance, psychosocial care, and community involvement.

Limitations Of The Study

This study faced several limitations that may have affected the data collection, and interpretation of the findings. These limitations included language barriers, lack of parental involvement, and limited religious diversity among participants.

Language barrier: The use of the Kinyarwanda language posed a significant limitation to this study. Many primary sources, interviews, and local documents were available only in Kinyarwanda, which required translation into English. This process increased the risk of misinterpretation, loss of nuance, and potential bias in meaning.

Lack of parental involvement: The study was limited by the lack of parental involvement. In research concerning street children, parents or guardians can provide essential insights into the children's backgrounds, family dynamics, and the factors contributing to their situation.

All participants were Catholics: This limited the diversification of viewpoints that could be considered the participants' views would be greatly influenced by the doctrines of the Catholic Church. This limits the ability to generalize the research findings to street children of other religions.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that children's exposure to street life prior to their admission into the rehabilitation program at All Children Humanitarian Foundation Centre was driven by a combination of poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, parental neglect, loss of caregivers, school-related challenges, and peer influence. These interconnected factors created environments characterized by insecurity, emotional distress, unmet basic needs, and limited opportunities for healthy development, ultimately pushing children toward the streets as a means of survival or escape. The findings further indicate that these pre-street experiences had significant psychosocial consequences, including trauma, low self-esteem, anxiety, mistrust, and social isolation. Therefore, preventing children's involvement in street life requires a holistic approach that addresses both the socioeconomic and psychosocial challenges faced by vulnerable children through family strengthening, poverty reduction, educational support, child protection services, and psychosocial interventions.

Suggestions For Further Research

Future studies should consider using larger sample size and mixed-method approaches to enhance the generalizability and depth of findings. Combining qualitative and quantitative data would provide a more comprehensive understanding of psychosocial well-being among street children. Future research should explore the perspectives of families, community members, and policymakers to gain a broader understanding of the factors influencing both street involvement and successful reintegration. Including multiple stakeholders would contribute to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Since this study focused only on boys, the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of girls were not explored. Including girls in future research would provide a broader understanding of the experiences of street children and allow for comparisons based on gender, which may enrich the findings and improve the applicability of the research conclusions.

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