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Social and health behaviors in youth of the streets of Ibadan, Nigeria[☆]

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Abstract

Objectives: This study documents the extent and impact of perceived patterns of behavior in a sample of youths of the streets of Ibadan, Nigeria, with the purpose of implementing a Life Skills Educational (LSE) intervention.

Method: The study uses both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Qualitatively, two Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and two in-depth interviews (IDI) with 20 boys and 2 community leaders were conducted on separate occasions for the purpose of eliciting commonly exhibited behaviors and patterns of street youth. Quantitatively, 169 youths (89.3% male) were consecutively interviewed from five subcultural areas in Ibadan, Nigeria. Street youths were accessed through a snowballing technique made possible by “Area boys” (AB, adults, who serve as a symbol of authority for street children).

Results: The mean age of participants was 18.4 years. The majority was on the street for financial reasons, had been on the street for more than 1 year, and had not completed their primary schooling. While youths of the street were economically viable, 69% had a history of alcohol abuse, 14% of drug abuse, and 24% operated as drug couriers; 46% reported school refusal, 27% school suspension, and 47% school truancy. Forty-nine percent admitted to being sex workers and 11% had been raped and were, therefore, at risk of contacting sexually transmitted diseases (STD). One-third of youths had been arrested for various offenses, including street fighting and drug use. While females were in the minority, they were more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors compared with boys.

Conclusions: Although many youths of the street display antisocial behaviors, they also are an economically viable group. Some of their antisocial behaviors may have been exhibited within the context of economic survival.

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Implementing a life skill program to address these antisocial behaviors may help to increase the well being of street youths in developing countries in Africa.

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Introduction

The issue of children of the street continues to attract the attention of social scientists and governmental bodies worldwide. Research has demonstrated that street children are more susceptible to specific social behaviors. They are often faced with the difficult choice of either resisting or falling in with violence, crime, drug abuse, and becoming sex workers (Anarfi & Antwi, 1995; Anyuru, 1996; Aptekar, 1996; Beyene & Berhane, 1997; Campbell & Ntsabane, 1995; Densley & Joss, 2000; Dube, Kamuura, & Bourdillon, 1996; Ifaturoti, 1994; Kruger & Richter, 1997; Phiri, 1996; Richter, 1996; Unicef, 1990; Wansi, Abbenyi, Mengue, Enyme, & Ntone, 1996).

Many factors may be responsible for the increasing numbers of children and young persons of the streets. These include the increasing level of individual, family, and national poverty, large family size, harmful socio-cultural and religious beliefs, forced early marriage and incest. Other factors include the increasingly fragile social support system, parental illness and the effects of unwanted pregnancy and child abandonment.

The phenomenon of street children with the socioeconomic effects on society needs attention, as every major city in Nigeria has street children. The children either live on the street or derive their existence through hawking wares, stealing, or begging. There are a few studies on street children in Nigeria (Aderinto, 2000; Bamisaiye, 1974; Ebigbo, 1996; Effiong, 1998; Maduewesi, 1993; Oloko, 1998; Oloruntimehin, 1970). The majority of studies have focused on juveniles held in institutions, such as “remand homes” (correctional centers for juvenile youths) or approved schools. These studies have tended to rely on adult assumptions as to how children feel and what they need. Children and young persons are rarely asked about their lives (Ennew, 1996).

With a recent exception (Aderinto, 2000), previous studies in Nigeria have focused on the prevalence and socio-demographic characteristics of street children (Bamisaiye, 1974; Ebigbo, 1996; Effiong, 1998; Maduewesi, 1993; Oloko, 1998; Oloruntimehin, 1970). They were, therefore, limited by their failure to delineate true children of the street from children on the street. The former, which was the focus of this study, refers to those children who live and work on the street, and view the street as their home. The latter refers to children who spent substantial period of time on the street, but will always return home to sleep. Previous studies have also not characterized behavior as perceived by children themselves; thus, experiences of antisocial behavior have been documented from the perspectives of adults.

In view of this short fall in methodology, particularly as it applies to documenting antisocial and health problems of children of the street in previous studies in Nigeria (Aderinto, 2000; Oloko, 1998), the present study, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches, documented the socio-demographic features of and the pattern of commonly exhibited antisocial behaviors of children and young persons of the streets of Ibadan. The findings would aid in the implementation of a Life Skills Educational (LSE) intervention to address these issues (WHO, 1996).

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