THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STREET CHILDREN IN MAHIKENG, NORTH WEST PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of street children is a worldwide problem affecting children and all aspects of their lives. These children continue to migrate to the streets for multiple reasons beyond their control. Attempts have been made globally to eradicate this problem; however, statistics on the increasing number of street children suggest that it will take years to eliminate. This study sought to explore the lived experiences of street children in Mahikeng, North West, South Africa. This study was underpinned by Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This was a qualitative study, based on purposive sampling; five street children were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. Data were thematically analysed, and findings showed that child homelessness is primarily the consequence of the absence of supportive family and friends, limited access to essential social services, inadequate income generation and poor financial management, and misuse of substances. These findings add to the body of knowledge of the social work profession, inform effective interventions, and shape policies to better support marginalised children. The researcher recommends that community practitioners and researchers strengthen community education on the causes that push children onto the streets. In addition, faith-based organisations must be consulted when designing programmes to support family stability.

Keywords: economic causes; experiences; Mahikeng; social work; street children

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of street children is a sensitive social ill that affects the whole world. Children on the streets, who are also called homeless and street children, find themselves living and working on the streets for their survival and fending for themselves and their families. Life on the streets often exposes them and subject them to hardships such as criminal activities at a young age, substance abuse, sexual exploitation, lack of parental love and supervision, and adequate healthcare (Bajari & Kuswarno, 2020; Makofane, 2019). According to Glauser (2015), a street child is a child who stays and spends most of his time on the street without parental supervision. These children often must adapt to life on the street and find ways to survive and fend for themselves to meet their basic needs, such as finding food (Glauser, 2015). There is inadequate knowledge about the lived experiences of street children, which in turn affects the development of policies and interventions that are relevant to addressing the challenges faced by street children. Therefore, the main research question of this study is: What are the lived experiences of street children in Mahikeng, North West, South Africa? The concept of street children will be defined as children who spend most of their day on the streets in a quest for survival but later go home to sleep (Julien, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The severity of the phenomenon varies by nation, and some statistics may not be a true reflection because of underreporting. A study by UNICEF (2015) revealed that about 150 million children were homeless in 2015 worldwide. At the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE, 2015), approximately 1,3 million school-age learners lived on the streets at some point between 2014 and 2015. It is quite evident from these statistics that the phenomenon of street children is a global problem that affects millions. There could be even more children who are homeless but are not reported in some regions. This suggests that some of the factors that push children to become homeless are poverty, domestic violence, abuse, parental rejection, and HIV/AIDS (Ehsan et al., 2017; Murran & Brady, 2023). The research that is highlighted here suggests that these street children could be coming from family backgrounds that are disorientated, hence their decision to seek refuge on the streets.

A study conducted by the European Commission (2015) estimated that in 2015, 1,4 million children experienced deprivation of material needs. Although this deprivation may not necessarily mean homelessness, this is an indication of children in dire need of care and protection. The phenomenon of street children is a sensitive issue affecting the world and in countries such as Egypt there were approximately 16 000 street children who were deprived of essential services and faced abuse and exploitation (Watkins, 2016). The phenomenon of homeless children is often contextualised and understood differently in different countries. In 2015, a study conducted in the United Kingdom revealed that there were approximately 9 100 children sleeping on the streets at any given time in England (Crisis, 2015), when in countries such as China, 200 000 children were homeless in 2014. However, statistics may be underreported in China (China Development Research Foundation, 2014). These statistics show that the phenomenon of street children is a consequence of personal circumstances, while the country's economic status does not contribute effectively towards preventing its occurrence.

Compared to other countries, the number of street children is small in Japan, where about 2400 people were reported to be homeless in 2014 (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2014). In Africa this phenomenon appears to be most severe. In 2015, more than 30 million street children were reported worldwide, 250 000 in South Africa alone (Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), 2015). In the North West, the number of street children is increasing, and due to their need for food, they often resort to eating leftovers from trash cans in the streets (Hai, 2014). The increase in the number of street children in South Africa is concerning, as the country is an upper middle-income country. South Africa has good social policies in place; however, these statistics demonstrate an urgent need for effective implementation of these policies to address the root causes of child homelessness and ensure that all children receive the support and resources necessary to lead fulfilling lives.

It is evident that much remains to be explored about the experiences of children living on the streets. Despite interventions from non-governmental as well as government organisations, children themselves are still on the street and highly visible in most urban centres. The main question is whether the policies in place are tailor-made to meet the needs of street children, or whether they are generalised for all children irrespective of their background.

Social welfare programmes and services for street children in South Africa

In South Africa, various social welfare programmes and services are implemented by the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to address the needs of street children. NGOs such as Children of South Africa and Childline provide essential support through outreach programmes, providing food, shelter, psychological support, and rehabilitation. These organisations are linked to other provincial and local organisations that serve the same purpose. Considering the saying that it takes a village to raise a child, these organisations collaborate with community members to identify children in need, link them to resources, and raise awareness about this phenomenon. On the governmental side, the South African Department of Social Development has established policies and programmes that address this phenomenon. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006), as amended, emphasises children's rights and aims to create a safe environment for all children in South Africa. Moreover, the government has safe homes that provide temporary shelters to street children, while social work practitioners investigate and attend to the case of the child. However, there is still a gap in these efforts, as not all eligible children in South Africa are reached.

EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN ON THE STREETS

Mental health of street children

Street children focus mainly on trying to survive and support themselves and their families, which often means they miss out on important dimensions such as education and healthcare. This struggle can lead to delayed development, affecting their cognitive and emotional wellbeing (Escueta et al., 2014). Many of these children feel anxious and depressed because they constantly face uncertainty and danger in their daily lives (Mishra & Kiran, 2017). Some may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from past abuse, as memories of their traumatic experiences come back to haunt them (Derivois et al., 2017; Hills et al., 2016;

Pluck et al., 2015). To cope with their difficult situation, some may turn to alcohol or drugs, leading to dependency issues (Chandra Das et al., 2024).

Social experiences of street children

Children on the streets are often judged, stigmatised, and often considered delinquents who ended up on the streets. This can often make them feel ashamed and affect their self-esteem, leading to a disturbance of their mental well-being (Ab Rahman et al., 2022). Society often judges and treats street children unfairly for several reasons, mainly because of misunderstandings and negative ideas about them. One major reason is the belief that street children are involved in criminal activities. Many people see these kids as troublemakers and think their difficult lives lead them to steal, use drugs or commit acts of violence. This negative view is often reinforced by the media, which tends to focus on their bad behaviour while ignoring the real struggles they face, such as poverty, abuse, and neglect (Gayapersad et al., 2023).

Economic experiences of street children

Street children face economic challenges that require them to develop strategies to survive the harsh environments in which they live (Hai, 2014). Most of them rely on scavenging for food in trash cans and eating leftover meals for survival (Deressa, 2022). Additionally, the author has observed that to meet their material needs, they get involved in street entertainments such as dancing at the traffic lights, directing cars in the parking lot in the malls, and helping people carry heavy groceries to their cars or taxis to get some money.

Children on the streets must deal not only with the baggage of their past and the economic challenges they may be facing in the present, but they also face abuse. Children on the streets can easily be exploited. They may, for instance, be taken advantage of by exploiters forcing them into labour such as selling goods and begging to make money for them (Smith, 2019). Street children are also at high risk of falling victim to sexual exploitation and trafficking. They may be lured with promises of shelter, food or money and then subjected to prostitution or forced labour in the sex trade. People often take advantage of street children to the extent that they are forced into drug trafficking or substance abuse, which can leave them dependent on substances (Smith, 2019). The next section will elaborate on the theoretical framework that guided this study.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study adopted Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as theoretical frameworks. Erikson's theory will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of ecological systems theory.

Erikson developed his theory in 1950 with the primary intention of providing an understanding of people's development trajectory throughout their lives and the way that social and cultural environments influence that development (Maree, 2022). Therefore, in relation to this study, it can be deduced that for an individual to master the challenges and conflicts they have in each developmental stage, they need supportive social and cultural structures to be able to navigate through those challenges successfully. This theory maintains that each individual passes

through eight developmental stages, each of which is characterised by a different psychological crisis that must be resolved by an individual before moving onto the next stage. Therefore, the implication here is that failure to cope with the current psychosocial crisis will lead to struggle later in life (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

The first stage of psychosocial theory is to learn basic trust versus basic mistrust. Erikson stated that infants up to the age of 18 months learn the process of trusting others in providing them with food, nourishment, warmth, and love (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). Later in life, they will develop trust in their friends and families; Failure to achieve this will be fixed in the subconscious mind of the child; the child will assume that parents cannot provide for them and therefore lead them to moving out of the family system onto the streets to seek what the family fails to provide (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

The second stage is autonomy versus shame and doubt. At this stage, toddlers learn to walk, talk, use the toilet, and do things for themselves; their self-control and self-confidence begin to develop at this stage (Ounjian, 2024). If parents do not encourage their children to make mistakes and learn, or disapprove of the child's act of independence, the child feels ashamed of his or her behaviour or doubts their own abilities. In this case, street children seek to be independent and explore their own abilities at a later stage; they tend to leave home because their parents were overprotective when they were young; it can be said that they are being rebellious, or they seek to experience power.

The third stage is initiative versus guilt. This stage applies to preschoolers aged 3 to 6. Preschoolers at this stage are physically active and are eager to learn; if they are encouraged to take the initiative to explore and learn, they are likely to assimilate this experience for use later in life (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). Erikson elucidates that if children cope with this stage effectively, they will be confident; however, those who are consistently restricted, punished, or treated harshly are likely to experience guilt and become passive observers who follow the lead of others (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

At stage four, industry versus inferiority, going to school is the important event for a child (Padhy, 2017). They learn to make things happen by using tools and acquire skills to become potential workers; They make a transition from the environment of the family to that of a social context; Their success in this stage will lead to success later in their lives, and failure will lead them to feeling inferior, which may lead them to dropping out of school and ending up living on the streets as a result of feeling inferior (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

The fifth stage is identity versus inferiority, which characterises the transition period from childhood to adulthood. At this stage, young people establish their identity and integrate it into their self-perception (Chen, 2019). As a result, adolescents who are homeless may not consolidate their personal identities and confusion in their personal experiences may create their uncertainty about their own identity (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

The sixth stage of psychosocial theory is intimacy versus isolation. At this stage, important events are love relationships; An individual who has not developed a clear sense of identity usually will fear a committed relationship and may retreat into isolation (Thekisho, 2016). Street children may fear commitment and retreat to isolation due to their previous encounters

in life; they may have experienced difficulties with intimate relationships such as being raped, so they will fear commitment and isolate themselves from others.

The seventh stage is generativity versus stagnation and is characterised by the need to create a living legacy. The child would have grown up at this point at any age ranging from 40 to 65 years, and grown street adults would experience stagnation in their lives if they did not have children and were not productive as individuals (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022).

The final stage is integrity versus despair. In this stage, Erikson states that the crisis of this stage is what characterises old age (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). He further explained that during this stage of life, people look back over their years and reflect on them; however, if street children reach old age and fail to cope successfully with past life crises, they will experience despair or give up hope (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). The discussion expands below on how ecological systems theory has been applied in this study.

Applicability of Erikson's psychosocial theory to this study

Erikson's psychosocial theory can help us understand the challenges faced by street children as they grow up. This theory suggests that everyone goes through stages of development, each with a specific conflict that needs to be resolved for healthy growth. Many street children have difficulty trusting others because they often face neglect or abandonment, making it difficult for them to form healthy relationships. As they get older, they might struggle to figure out who they are due to the stigma they face and the difficult experiences of life on the street. This can lead to feelings of isolation and difficulties in building close relationships with others. By looking at their lives through the lens of Erikson's theory, we can better understand what these children need to develop a positive sense of self and build trusting relationships.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

This theory was developed in 1979 by a Russian-American psychologist named Urie Bronfenbrenner. He created this theory to help us better understand how children develop. He believed that it was important to look at the bigger picture, including the social, cultural, and historical factors that influence the way that children grow and learn.

An ecological perspective is one that highlights the interaction between people and their surroundings, considering the influence they have on each other. The theory outlines the stages of development through different levels of environmental influences. According to this theory, there are five systems that are interconnected and influence each other: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory has been applied here to help explain how the environment in which children are found can influence them.

Subsystems of the ecological environment

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem refers to the immediate environment around an individual, including family and friends. In the context of street children, this means that a disoriented family life characterised by abusive behaviour, lack of support, and love can significantly influence a child's development. In addition, peer pressure can also play a role in

persuading children to adopt a homeless lifestyle, as their immediate surroundings shape their choices and experiences.

The mesosystem encompasses the connections between different microsystems, which means the relationships that a child has with various groups. For example, a strained relationship with caregivers could lead a child to seek stronger bonds with peers. Although these friendships can provide emotional support, they can also expose children to risky behaviours. Moving up the framework, the exosystem includes broader social systems that indirectly impact the development of a child, such as social welfare systems. In this study, it becomes evident that a lack of adequate support from these systems can lead to children resorting to street life, indicating a lack of available resources to assist them. The macrosystem involves societal norms and laws that shape the child's environment, and it can be inferred that existing laws are insufficient, as evidenced by the high number of street children. Finally, the chronosystem considers the changing world across generations. To address this phenomenon, the researcher advocates for changes in social welfare policies and the establishment of child and youth care centres in regions where street children are prevalent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Applicability of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to this study

Bronfenbrenner's theory is helpful for understanding street children because it looks at all the different factors that shape their lives. It starts with their immediate surroundings, including family and friends; If a child comes from a troubled home with abuse or neglect, he might end up on the streets. The theory also considers how these relationships connect, such as the way that a strained bond with caregivers could lead a child to lean more on friends for support, which sometimes leads to risky behaviour. Additionally, it emphasises the role of larger social systems, such as social services; If these systems fail to support children from difficult backgrounds, they might have no choice but to live on the streets. Overall, this theory shows that to truly understand and help street children, we need to look at their entire environment and the support they receive from various sources.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach that focusses on exploring and understanding phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing them. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative methods allow researchers to gain in-depth insight into people's experiences, perceptions, and meanings. This approach was particularly suitable for this study, as the goal was to gather detailed information from street children about their lived experiences. An explorative descriptive study design was used to investigate the social realities of street children, specifically examining the reasons they choose this lifestyle and their experiences of it. In the context of street children in Mahikeng, the descriptive case study aimed to clarify how these children ended up on the streets, the factors that influenced their decisions, and why they chose this path over other options.

The study population is the entire group on which the research wants to conduct the study (Creswell, 2014). The population for this investigation consisted of children on the street in Mahikeng under the age of 18 years. Non-probability sampling was utilised, focusing on children between the ages of 10 and 18 years who were beneficiaries of the Kagontle Child and

Youth Care Centre. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants based on the researcher's judgment about who would provide the most representative information (Babbi, 2014). Data collection methods included interviews and observations. Face-to-face interviews allowed the researcher to engage directly with street children, gaining a deeper understanding of their perspectives (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Furthermore, observation enabled the researcher to record and analyse behaviours without direct communication, which yielded valuable insights into group dynamics (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Thematic data analysis was then undertaken to organise and interpret the qualitative data collected, following a systematic process to identify themes and subthemes that emerged from the children's experiences, ultimately aiming to present a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Miles et al., 2014).).

Ethical considerations

The ethics clearance number is NWU-00311-16-S9.

Before data collection, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the North West University Health Research Ethics Committee to carry out the study. The researcher also obtained approval from the Department of Social Development (DSD). Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre is a beneficiary of the Department, and the researcher also collected data from the Centre.

This study was carried out carefully to avoid any harm to the participants. Instead of judging the children, the researcher focused on understanding the reasons why they ended up on the streets. To follow ethical guidelines, the researcher made sure each child participated willingly in the study and no one was forced to join. They were respectfully recruited through the Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre and were free to say no if they felt uncomfortable. The researcher also provided a written consent form with all study details, which was explained in simple terms so that the children could understand before agreeing to participate. Privacy was protected by conducting interviews in a private space and keeping their information safe and confidential. To ensure that the children felt emotionally safe, the researcher avoided asking questions that could be too uncomfortable and had a social worker on standby to support the children if any difficult feelings appeared during interviews.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The following are the themes that emerged from the study.

Theme 1: Factors that lead children to live on the streets.

Several studies have been conducted with the primary aim of understanding the factors that contribute most significantly to the phenomenon of street children. According to Embleton et al. (2015), neglect and abuse are among the reasons children live on the streets. In some circumstances, abandonment is what leads them to the streets. When a guardian or parent fails to meet the fundamental needs of another child, some may feel alone and end up going to the streets to care for themselves (Embleton et al., 2015).

During the interview with the participants, they all came up with different reasons for what led them mainly to living on the streets. One participant said:

Immediately after my parents died, I realised that I couldn't cope anymore, I needed money, and ended up going to the Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre and depending on the streets.

The death of a parent or immediate caregiver at a tender age leads the child to experience trauma, loneliness, and feelings of helplessness after being used to being taken care of by the deceased. In some circumstances, children are not used to staying with the potential new caregiver and would therefore feel empty and seek a place of "safety". Losing a parent or caregiver leads to psychological challenges, and experiencing this at a young age and not receiving support and guidance can lead children to go to the streets and indulge in risky behaviours such as substance abuse (Bah, 2018).

One participant said:

There are no parents who can care for us [he and his cousins]*, we are left with our aunt at home, but she does not live with us at home, but spends most of her time drinking alcohol.*

Substance abuse by caregivers is the other reason children take to the streets rather than be subjected to an environment that is not nurturing (Embleton et al., 2015). Children who depend on caregivers who abuse substances are also subjected to an environment full of uncertainty, which makes them feel insecure and unstable, and so they end up on the street.

Apart from these reasons, some participants mentioned that they enjoyed it more on the streets and in the Centre than at home because they did not have friends to play with at home. Embleton et al. (2015) discovered that another reason children live on the streets is the influence of peers. Some children would come from nurturing families but would end up living on the streets because they sought independence at an early age and were influenced by their peers.

There are various indications that street children are mentally sound; as a result, many of them decide to leave home rationally or rather depend on social assistance or the streets to generate income. They do so gradually rather than abruptly. Most of them do not anticipate receiving negative responses from the public and the authorities. Consequently, they are suspicious of strangers. When asked what caused him to depend on the Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre, a participant said,

My friends recruited me, there was a party at the Centre, and they called me to join them.

This response is a simple indication that you may not always find a child who relies on social assistance and does odd jobs on the streets for common reasons such as death or neglect of parents or substance abuse by parents; there may be other reasons such as recruiting friends and enjoying the streets more than home. These factors and causes are often overlooked, and researchers focus on the more common explanations.

Theme 2: The availability of social support

The existence of family and friends plays an important role in the lives of street children. These relationships meet the emotional, social, and emotional needs of street children, which helps them to cope with the challenges they face on the streets (Reza & Henly, 2018). Moreover, the friends they make on the streets give them a sense of security, accompaniment, and belonging, and this solidarity can alleviate the stressors and hardships of living on the streets (Reza & Henly, 2018).

When most of the children were asked about friends and family in their lives, a few even mentioned their friends' names, which shows an acknowledgement of their value in their lives. One participant explained that: 'I have friends and family and they treat me well, take care of me, give me clothes and food' (the participant was referring to his grandmother, with whom he lives).

One participant said, 'My friends can help me when I don't have money, they give me.' Other participants said 'My friends are Thabang, Neo, Oarabile and Oratile, and I also have a family' and 'Oarabile and Goitsemodimo are my friends, and my family is at home'.

It is quite evident that learning to build trust at a young age is vital. This is because it is easy to trust the friends you have left when the primary caregiver has died, and you have no one to depend on. The friends who are available in their lives made it easy for them to accept the things they cannot change and the need to improvise and utilise the support networks they have.

Theme 3: Social services available to children on the street

Social services play an important role in providing for the multiple needs of street children and in providing critical support for their healthy living (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2020). These services include, but are not limited to, access to healthcare services, access to food, psychosocial support, and reintegration into the family (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2020).

When participants were asked where they bathed, what they ate, and what clothing they acquired, they replied that they did all at the Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre. They have been depending on it so long that they even lost track of the years. When one participant was asked if he enjoyed being at the Centre, he responded,

> *Yes, because they teach us and give us food.*

When asked how he feels about depending on the streets and the Centre, he responded: "I don't feel well at home, they make me angry. I love it more at the Centre because I have friends who I can play with". One participant said: 'It has been a long time [I have been] depending on the Centre, I stayed there, they took us out, we stayed there, and they took us out.'

Social services play an important role in providing access to basic education for street children. Social workers ensure that the rights of street children are met and advocated for, regardless of the background from which they come from and their circumstances (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2020). Having access to social workers implies that their psychosocial well-being, which had been disrupted due to the passing of a parent or caregiver, is prioritised and the trauma that comes with such loss would be addressed.

Theme 4: Income-generating activities carried out by children on the streets.

The main factors that lead children to live on the streets have been discussed, including the lack of provision for primary needs, among others. The generation of income by street children is a very important aspect as it helps them survive (Gunhidzirai ,2023). There are multiple ways for street children to generate income. Although society regards the intentions and behaviours of street children to be wholly negative, some of their attempts to generate income are based on positive intentions.

Among the interview questions that the participants were asked was how they make money and what they do with that money. One participant said,

> *I carry at OK (Supermarket). I buy Vaseline and cigarettes* [with] *the money.*

This means that he helps people to carry groceries to their cars and public transport in return for money. Another participant said: 'I get a job and buy food with it, especially a large meal of maize.'

The way children on the street spend their money is important for their survival. Although some use it for harmful substances and temporary leisure activities (Gunhidzirai ,2023), it is emerging from the responses that some street children value any cent they receive and therefore use it to meet their needs. The support services available to street children should develop their personal skills so that they generate income in a way that will sustain them longer.

Theme 5: Use of harmful substances in the streets

The participants indicated that the money they receive on the street is used for harmful substances. When asked what kind of substances they used, one participant shared: "I only smoke cigarettes and I know it's not okay and it kills". In support, one participant added:

> *Yes, I smoke cigarettes and I smoke them to alleviate stress.*

It is quite evident that street children do not have the mental frame of mind to use money in a more sustainable way. Although the findings of a study conducted by Bah (2018) revealed that some street children would rather buy food and clothes, others have developed negative behaviours such as using harmful substances and therefore need to generate income to feed their behaviours. The high usage of harmful substances among street children may be the result of peer pressure and the desire to fit in (Masresha et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The death of one or both parents can be one of the aspects that force children to walk the streets in the hope of finding a better environment (Whitbeck, 2017). This is especially true if the parent who died was the one who was much closer to the children. Children feel a sudden, substantial void in their lives and end up living on the streets. With the failure to find comfort at home and the lack of professional trauma counselling, they choose life on the street in the hope of finding comfort and consolation (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015).

Kisirkoi and Mse (2016) argue that parents who are dependent on alcohol fail to care for the needs of their children, such as providing food, education, clothing, and shelter. Furthermore,

alcoholic parents verbally abuse their children after consuming alcohol, become impatient with their children and, in the end, beat them without good reason (Kisirkoi & Mse, 2016). Compared to physical abuse, they are subjected to at home, they find street life better because they may not be exposed to such violence and aggression. Alcoholism even has the effect of weakening the bond between parents and their children (Choate, 2015). This could be due to a lack of attention and support for the child by their parents and therefore overall caregiving can suffer.

Erikson stated that in the first stage of development, basic trust versus basic mistrust, infants up to the age of 18 months learn the process of trusting others to provide them with food, nourishment, warmth, and love (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Later in life, they will develop trust in their friends and families; failure to achieve this will be lodged in the subconscious mind of the child; the child will assume that the parents cannot provide for them and may therefore lead them to leaving the family system for the streets to seek what the family fails to provide (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

Since it is apparent that most of the participants are living without their immediate family members but that living with their relatives does not meet their basic needs, they have learnt from and grown to depend on their friends, the streets, and the social assistance available to them. As a result, they have built a strong trust in those who will fill the gap left by the death of their parents and the failure to meet their basic needs.

Just like any other children who have homes and live with their families, street children are also entitled to have their fundamental needs, such as clothing and shelter, met. Everyone should ensure that they advocate for the implementation of programmes designed to alleviate the condition of street children. The state should be the main entity responsible and obliged to take good care of these children.

The environment to which the child is exposed is what grooms and nurtures them, and what influences their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. According to Erikson, a person goes through a series of stages during their life where there is a need for a clear social and cultural structure to shape their lives. But street children find themselves in a corner alone and without guidance or nurturing and are bound to use their discretion to navigate the world. A child needs guidance to grow up knowing what is acceptable and not; the failure or unavailability of this structure in their lives may lead them astray.

Although Hills et al. (2016) have stated that in South Africa the estimated number of street children is 250 000, this number is expected to increase due to factors that include the levels of adult unemployment and the breakdown of the support systems of African families.

Social welfare systems at the disposal of the vulnerable group, in this case, street children, play a crucial role in their lives. It is quite evident that the Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre has been the best and most trustworthy structure for all the children interviewed. Any society with an abundance of these services can save and restore the lives of millions of children around the world.

Economic decline has been experienced around the world and this has put a lot of strain on individual families (Molahlehi, 2014). In South Africa, another economic factor to consider is the inflation rate. This problem has the potential to limit the ability of families to take care of their children, which is a contributing factor for children to turn to the streets to survive and to seek additional family income through begging, vending, and doing odd jobs.

The interviews with the participants suggest that some of them have grown to be very responsible, regardless of having grown up with their relatives who failed to raise them in a manner that is normally acceptable. They have priorities that they have to take care of when they get money from their odd jobs and stick to them. The researcher has observed that they have not allowed their background to define them and stop them from doing what they can to generate income and strive for survival.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a useful framework to understand the factors that influence the lives of street children. At the microsystem level, these street children come from disoriented backgrounds where abuse, neglect, or the absence of stable caregivers has significantly impacted on their development. Therefore, it can be deduced that this lack of support at home drove these children to the streets, where they seek a sense of belonging to their peers, regardless of exposure to an environment that is not conducive to their development.

The mesosystem reveals that broken relationships with their families push them towards their peers, also to find emotional support, which can also expose them to risky behaviours. The broader system, which in this case includes the Department of Social Development, may have tried to address the issue, but the attempts were not sufficient to find foster parents for these children or to provide safe and temporary shelters for them. Consequently, at the macrosystem level, the policies and laws that have been established by the government show a gap in implementation, since the phenomenon of street children is still at a high level in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to explore the experiences of street children in Mahikeng, North West Province, South Africa. To first explore the phenomenon of street children, the researcher conducted a preliminary literature review, which focused on some factors such as the causes that lead children to live on the streets and the risks they face when on the streets. The researcher reviewed studies published by various researchers to understand the phenomenon of street children from different perspectives. The researcher found that the phenomenon is an ongoing global problem that is caused by factors such as unemployment and the economies under strain.

To address the main aim of the study, the researcher then conducted one-on-one interviews with five willing participants to collect data that would address the main research question and research objectives. The first objective was to establish the profiles of children living on the street of Mahikeng; this was achieved through interviews and the findings were captured in the table that indicates their demographic characteristics. The objective was to explore the experiences of street children. The interview schedule included several questions related to understanding the experiences of the children. The final objective was to make

recommendations to other researchers who would conduct studies following the identification of loopholes and limitations in this study and pursue additional questions related to the phenomenon of street children.

The primary research question was what the experiences of street children are like; the researcher managed to identify that essentially street life is a dangerous place for these children. This finding is supported by the reality of aspects such as premature exposure to harmful substances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organisations such as the Kagontle Child and Youth Care Centre should be established by the National Department of Social Development to eradicate the phenomenon of street children. The remarks and feedback from street children illustrate how powerful and positive the impact of this centre was on their lives. If more of these organisations could be established in every district in South Africa, the attempts by the government to address the problem would be not only more visible, but also more effective.

The government in partnership with the local non-governmental organisations in different municipalities or districts should take accountability and design culturally competent programmes pertinent to them to strengthen families. This is because a family is an immediate influence on the early life of a child, and it takes a village to raise and groom a child. These programmes will empower families to nurture their children at an early age, socialise them and engage with the community, so that even when death knocks on the door, the children would have learnt all the coping mechanisms to deal with multiple problems and know where to seek help.

Researchers in this field should educate and inform street children about their rights and the social services they qualify for.

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