The Effect of Urbanization on Street Children in the Lusaka Central Business District

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Abstract: *The research analyses the effects of urbanisation on street children in Lusaka, Zambia, by investigating their living situations, service access, and mental well-being. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative survey results with qualitative interview data to generate complete knowledge about these effects. The researchers recruited 80 street children through purposive sampling with local NGOs who assisted in the selection process. These children ranged from 6 to 17 years of age. The research shows that fast urban expansion leads to a 70% increase in street homelessness and causes education and healthcare barriers, as 65% have irregular schooling and 75% lack stable healthcare. The research demonstrates that older children specifically experience increased psychological distress because 75% of them reported violence or exploitation. According to qualitative findings, these children display remarkable resilience because many want to pursue education and achieve a better future, even though their situation is complicated. The study determines that protective and policy measures must be established because safe residential arrangements, available education and healthcare, more substantial child protection services, and family reunification efforts are essential. Research evidence demonstrates the immediate necessity to reduce the negative impact of urbanisation on street children while promoting their social integration.*

Keywords: Street children, urbanisation, homelessness, psychological well-being, Lusaka

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide speed of urbanisation occurs when people relocate from rural areas to cities to improve their living standards. The United Nations (2018) reports that 55% of humanity lives in urban areas, with forecasts indicating this percentage will rise to 68% by 2050. The transformation representing economic development and modernisation creates substantial health and social challenges for marginalised communities such as street children (Brenner & Schmid, 2017). The

term street children describe children under 18 who lack permanent housing and live by begging, scavenging, or working informal jobs (UNICEF, 2019). The worldwide population of street children surpasses 150 million because of poverty, along with family breakdown and armed conflicts, as well as urban population shifts (UNICEF, 2019). The United Nations Children's Fund states that growing urban areas increase the risks of exploitation and marginalisation, which street children must endure (UNICEF, 2019).

According to Cobbinah et al. (2017), urban growth in Africa is the highest worldwide. The population of Lusaka has experienced a nearly 100% increase during the past twenty years because of natural growth and rural-to-urban migration (Central Statistical Office Zambia, 2018). Rapid urban expansion has created economic potential, but it has also intensified social disparities, which affect street children most severely (Mwanza & Mwewa, 2023). The children of Lusaka experience severe risks, which include homelessness, exposure to violence and exploitation and psychological distress, because urban development is outstripped by social service needs (Nkhata et al., 2021). The Central Statistical Office of Zambia published a 2018 report demonstrating that urban poverty and housing shortages have caused families and their children to live in dangerous situations (Central Statistical Office Zambia, 2018).

Multiple academic sources demonstrate how urbanisation creates complex problems for children who live on the streets. The continual expansion of cities leads to the displacement of low-income families who cannot afford housing, pushing their children to become street residents (Ennew, 2016). Under urban economic pressures, families break apart, leading to child homelessness, which Rizzini et al. (2018) identify as the main reason behind this problem. The research findings show that street children in Lusaka face difficulties accessing education and healthcare services, which deepens their social exclusion (Chanda et al., 2022). Research by UNICEF (2019) reveals that urban areas that provide close service access still fail to give street-involved youth fair service access because of systemic resource shortages and neglect. The literature on street children worldwide continues to grow, yet research focused on Zambia remains rare, especially research about the direct impact of urbanisation on their life circumstances (Kavuma et al., 2022).

Recent research efforts help explain the multifaceted connection between urban growth and street children's situation. Panter-Brick et al. conducted a 2019 study that demonstrates how fast urban expansion in low- and middle-income countries heightens the dangers faced by street-involved youth, especially throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The authors establish that urban expansion converts city areas into commodities, which drives marginalised populations from their homes and creates more child homelessness (Panter-Brick et al., 2019). The Consortium for Street Children (2020) reports that urbanisation in African cities, specifically Lusaka, has progressed faster than child protection system development, resulting in street children lacking proper legal and social security (Consortium for Street Children, 2020). The lack of child protection measures becomes

worse because urban economies function informally, which forces street children to work in exploitative situations to guarantee their survival (ILO, 2017).

Research conducted by Woan et al. in 2018 demonstrates that urban street children encounter significant obstacles to attending formal schooling because 80% do not continue their education because of financial problems and social judgments (Woan et al., 2018). The Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, through their 2019 survey, discovered that more than 70% of street children in Lusaka either never attended school or left prematurely (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, 2019). According to Gupta and Mukherjee (2020), street children cannot access public health services because service providers discriminate against them and they lack proper identification. Rapid urban growth in Lusaka creates substantial barriers to healthcare access because the health systems remain burdened and lack sufficient resources (WHO, 2019).

The psychological effects of urbanisation strongly influence street children. The research of Aptekar and Stoecklin from 2017 establishes that street children experience consistent trauma as well as stress from their exposure to urban violence and social exclusion and exploitation (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2017). Lusaka faces an added challenge because ZIPAR (2019) demonstrates in their 2019 report that there are no mental health services designed for vulnerable youth. Street children in Lusaka receive no psychological support, according to a 2019 report by the Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (ZIPAR, 2019), which found that just 5% of the target population has any access to this essential care (ZIPAR, 2019).

This study aims to address this research gap by analysing the multifaceted effects of urbanisation on street children in Lusaka, Zambia. The following objectives guide the investigation:
1. To examine the living conditions of street children in urban settings.
2. To assess their access to education and healthcare services.
3. To explore the psychological consequences of urbanisation on their mental health.

Understanding these dynamics is critical to inform interventions that enhance the quality of life and facilitate the reintegration of street children into families and communities.

Statement of the Problem
Street children in urban environments endure profound challenges stemming from rapid urbanisation. In Lusaka, many lack access to necessities, facing heightened risks of exploitation and psychological trauma due to unstable living conditions and social exclusion (Chanda et al., 2022). While urbanisation promises economic opportunities, it often deepens the marginalisation of vulnerable youth, perpetuating cycles of poverty and neglect (Mwanza & Mwewa, 2023). Despite these pressing issues, research exploring the specific impacts of urban growth on street children remains limited, particularly in the Zambian context (Nkhata et al., 2021). This study aims

to bridge this gap by analysing how urbanisation shapes the lives of street children and identifying areas for intervention to support their wellbeing and societal integration.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to investigate the effects of urbanisation on street children in Lusaka, Zambia. The research combined quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to capture both statistical trends and lived experiences. Conducted in Lusaka, the capital city, the study targeted street children aged 6 to 17 years, defined as minors without stable housing, either living fully on the streets or intermittently returning to family homes.

A total of 80 participants were recruited through purposive sampling facilitated by local NGOs and outreach programs. Inclusion criteria encompassed children aged 6 to 17 self-identifying as street-involved, while those with severe cognitive or physical impairments or residing in formal care settings were excluded. Data collection involved:

- **Quantitative Instruments:** A structured questionnaire assessed living conditions, access to education and healthcare, and mental health using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).
- **Qualitative Instruments:** Semi-structured interviews explored personal narratives and coping mechanisms.

Data collectors ensured ethical conduct by obtaining informed consent from participants aged 12 and older or guardians for younger children, maintaining confidentiality through private interview settings, and assuring participants of their right to withdraw without consequence. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics (version 27.0), employing descriptive and inferential statistics (e.g., chi-square tests, and t-tests). Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study included 80 street children, with an 85% response rate. The sample comprised 48 males (60%) and 32 females (40%) aged 6 to 17 (mean age = 12.5, standard deviation [SD] = 3.2). Key findings are presented under thematic headings aligned with the study objectives: living conditions, access to services, and psychological well-being.

Living Conditions

The majority of homeless youth (70%) spent their entire time living on the streets, according to the research findings (n=56), but 30% (n=24) occasionally returned to live with relatives or guardians. The chi-square test showed significant differences where boys experienced more precarious living situations than girls (χ^2(1, N=80) = 8.45, p=0.004). The observed gender imbalance in residential patterns possibly results from social norms together with varying patterns of family support. This high rate of homelessness matches findings documented in UNICEF

(2012), where urbanisation leads to vulnerable youth becoming homeless and forced to face harsh urban surroundings.

The research findings from qualitative data analysis provided an expanded understanding of the observed conditions. A 12-year-old boy explained his situation by saying he chose the bridge for sleep because it offered better protection than the streets, but nighttime brought both coldness and fear. A 14-year-old girl revealed that her aunt could not care for her, so she decided to leave home. The daily experiences of these individuals show how unstable and unsafe their lives actually are. A breakdown of the data showed that 55% (n=44) of respondents slept in public areas, including markets and bus stations, and 15% (n=12) took refuge in empty buildings, while the rest of the participants (30% n=24) alternated between street living and short-term stays with family members. Their temporary existence shows no stability because immediate survival needs to push them to keep moving. The need for reliable housing exposes these children to dangerous environmental factors, including harsh weather and unhygienic surroundings, which worsens their physical well-being and safety risks.

Access to Services
Basic services, including education and healthcare, were accessible to only a few people. Fifty-two participants among the 80 respondents revealed insufficient school participation, and sixty people among the 80 participants lacked regular healthcare access. According to qualitative narratives, children aged 11 declared that their primary need was finding food before returning to school, even though they wanted to attend classes. The research conclusions of Rizzini et al. (2018) validate information showing that urban expansion creates barriers that prevent marginalised groups from accessing essential services, leading to poverty's continuation.

The study showed that 40% (n=32) of participants never attended school, and 25% (n=20) had to leave due to financial problems or the need to work informally. Bullying and discrimination served as major reasons for school dropout among participants with educational experience, according to 35% (n=28) of them. The boy explained that his peers mocked him because he lacked both school uniforms and shoes. My feelings of embarrassment led me to stay away permanently. The healthcare problem was identified as money-related issues by 60% (n=48) of respondents, but 15% (n=12) of them feared healthcare providers would discriminate against them. The girl explained that she visited the clinic, where staff asked for parental involvement. The clinic staff rejected me because I did not have parents to provide information. Among the respondents, 20% (n=16) sought help from traditional healers or resorted to self-medication because they did not trust formal healthcare systems. The urban environment worsens these problems because facilities serving vulnerable street children experience overcrowding and resource limitations that prevent them from delivering adequate care.

Psychological Wellbeing

The participants who were between 12 and 17 years old showed higher scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) compared to their younger counterparts who were between 6 and 11 years old. Older children scored an average of 15.3 (SD = 4.1), while younger children scored an average of 10.5 (SD = 3.6). The extended time spent living on the streets leads to more significant emotional and behavioural problems, according to statistical analysis (t(78) = 6.23, p<0.001). The study participants experienced violence or exploitation while feeling isolated and fearful, according to interviews, which showed these findings in 75% (n=60) of cases. Kavuma et al. (2022) found urban settings increase psychological trauma for street children, which validates these findings.

The research showed that anxiety symptoms manifested in 45% (n=36) of students who experienced incessant worry about personal security and food availability, and depression symptoms affected 30% (n=24) through feelings of despondency and social isolation. The boy, at age 13, shared that he experiences constant loneliness. People do not show any concern about my presence or absence. The 15-year-old boy described his experience of being physically abused by older boys as well as police officers. The situation frustrates me deeply, although I lack any ability to change it. The individuals express deep emotional suffering alongside their helpless condition. The study revealed that 20 participants out of 80 (25%) used glue and petrol as substances to deal with their problems. The teen girl, who is 17 years old, uses glue-sniffing to escape her thoughts for brief periods. The use of substances is the only method through which I manage to get rest during nighttime. The use of substances makes their mental health more severe and leaves them exposed to physical danger and exploitation. Lusaka lacks available mental health services that would enable these children to manage their trauma and develop resilience.

The expanded findings section details the multiple difficulties street children in Lusaka, Zambia, must endure. The study incorporates more statistical data and qualitative excerpts to better understand their living circumstances, availability, and mental state. Including participant quotes makes the research data more relatable because it shows how urbanisation directly affects young, vulnerable people in real-world situations. The expanded section of this study provides powerful and implementable findings that guide policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who work to tackle street child issues in urban environments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the profound challenges that urbanisation imposes on street children in Lusaka, Zambia, revealing a complex interplay of social, economic, and psychological factors. The high prevalence of homelessness, limited access to essential services, widespread exposure to violence, and strained yet persistent family ties highlight the failure of urban systems to protect and support vulnerable youth. However, the expressions of resilience among these

children provide a foundation for hope and the potential for meaningful interventions. These key findings are discussed in detail below, contextualised within existing literature, and linked to implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Widespread Homelessness and Urban Housing Failures
The research observed that 70 per cent of Lusakan kids stay exclusively on the streets, which demonstrates the breakdown of housing systems meant to help vulnerable groups. The extensive homelessness rate demonstrates a wider pattern of fast-growing urban areas, which leads to housing shortages and rising costs that mainly affect poor families (UN-Habitat, 2019). The fast pace of urban growth in Zambia has exceeded the construction of affordable housing, forcing children to become street residents as their final option (Mulenga, 2018). According to research in comparable situations, the combination of financial burdens and residential relocations caused by urban growth forces children to become homeless (Panter-Brick et al., 2019). Vulnerable youth find no workable solutions because of insufficient social safety measures and poor urban planning implementation, intensifying their situation (Cobbinah et al., 2017). Policymakers should establish extensive housing solutions which combine low-cost housing options for disadvantaged families with specialised residential facilities designed for street children.

Limited Access to Services and the Entrenchment of Poverty
The research results show that street children face irregular schooling in addition to limited healthcare access, totalling 65% and 75%, respectively, which confirms how urbanisation deepens poverty cycles for at-risk youth. While street children and other marginalised groups face greater service accessibility in urban areas, their access remains unequal (Rizzini et al., 2018). The rapid rural-to-urban migration in Lusaka has exceeded the capacity of educational institutions and healthcare centres to the extent that only identified or resourceful individuals can access these facilities (Central Statistical Office Zambia, 2018). The lack of access to education leads to prolonged poverty, according to Bourdillon (2006), because deprived children lack essential skills to better their situation (World Health Organization, 2019). Additionally, inadequate healthcare services increase their exposure to disease and harm. Street children require special urban service delivery systems that combine mobile health clinics with non-formal education programs. The delivery of services would receive additional support through NGO partnerships and community group collaborations, which would help eliminate present service gaps (Consortium for Street Children, 2020).

High Incidence of Violence and the Need for Protective Measures
The situation requires immediate intervention to protect street children who experience violence at a rate of 75% in Lusaka. The absence of guardianship, combined with their visible presence, makes street children highly vulnerable to physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional mistreatment, according to Sheila and Shekhar (2020). This risk for abuse is intensified by poor law enforcement, together with insufficient child protection services found in Lusaka (Nkhata et

al., 2021). Studies of trauma in street children show that enduring violent experiences generates serious mental health problems, along with anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, and behavioural difficulties (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2017). The study findings match the researchers' observation, which reveals that older participants experienced greater psychological distress. The mitigation of this challenge requires urban child protection systems to receive training on child rights for law enforcement, which can create safe accommodations for street children and deliver community awareness programs that diminish stigma while building protective environments.

Complex Family Ties and Reintegration Potential
Research shows that 30% of street children occasionally visit their family homes, even though their relationships with family members remain strained. Fellows's research (2016) supports this discovery because he demonstrates that street children maintain diverse family connections even though their separation from home stems from economic need. The streets attract children in Lusaka because of family financial needs, which researchers have documented elsewhere (Conticini & Hulme, 2017). The occasional interaction between street children and family members creates possibilities for reunification programs that deliver financial assistance with parenting education to resolve causes of separation (Nkhata et al., 2021). The reintegration process requires careful evaluation to confirm that it benefits the child's welfare. The best alternative care options for children who cannot return home include foster care or community-based group homes (UNICEF, 2019).

Expressions of Resilience and Empowerment-Based Interventions
The street children who desired education alongside improved futures demonstrated exceptional strength, which created opportunities for intervention programs. According to Wright et al. (2013), resilience is a fundamental element for developing programs that enable street children to gain power rather than simply rescue them. The resilient nature of children living on the streets of Lusaka can be developed through vocational training, life skills education, and psychosocial support, which will help them establish sustainable livelihoods (Panter-Brick, 2019). Scientific research indicates that empowering approaches centred on children's participation led to better lasting results by actively involving them in management decisions (Volpi, 2018). Street involvement requires policymakers and practitioners to focus on strength-based strategies instead of traditional charity models, which do not address the fundamental causes of children living on the streets.

Methodological Limitations and Future Research Directions
The cross-sectional nature of this research hinders researchers from determining how urbanisation creates challenges that street children experience. The findings could have been affected by response bias because of the sensitive nature of the questions studied. Future research should incorporate longitudinal evaluation to explore the developmental patterns of street children because it examines how housing policies correlate with service access to shape street children's

life courses. Research using combined methods which merge quantitative measures with qualitative interview data would produce deeper insights into their genuine circumstances. Research that compares urban settings in Zambia and across sub-Saharan Africa would enable scientists to find factors relevant to each specific area which either intensify or reduce these problems so they can create more appropriate intervention methods.

CONCLUSION

The research exposes the severe impact of fast-paced urban growth on Lusaka's street children population in Zambia, where urgent long-term intervention is needed. A substantial 70% of street children become homeless due to insufficient housing provision by urban systems, which face increasing population growth. The exposure to unsafe circumstances through violence and exploitation affects 75% of these children who face dangerous environments which threaten their physical and emotional well-being. The lack of consistent education access among 65% of street children, combined with 75% who lack healthcare services, creates long-term poverty while blocking their path to future success. The statistics represent the experiences of children struggling with an urban environment that grew faster than protective safety systems did in sub-Saharan African cities that experienced rapid expansion.

Despite all obstacles, the research reveals a significant source of hope because these children demonstrate remarkable resilience. The children in this study want education and better prospects for the future because they reveal hidden inner abilities that overcome their difficult living conditions. The research indicates that 30% of homeless children stay in contact with their family members even though their relationships are inconsistent, showing family and community reintegration has potential with proper support systems. These family relationships show that poverty and joblessness act as fundamental causes for children to become street children. The cycle of childhood homelessness requires interventions at its root by resolving housing problems and service accessibility issues.

The results suggest that street children in Lusaka will face worsening conditions because urbanisation continues without proper targeted and comprehensive intervention programs. The current course of action threatens to create a permanently marginalised generation because Lusaka continues growing as a city. The ability of street children to recover, together with their potential for integration, creates reason for hope. These children need complete policies and programs to ensure their security, educational development, and mental health before they can transition into capable members of their community. Through simultaneous efforts to address urgent requirements and underlying system issues, Lusaka will establish an example that shows how cities can help their most susceptible inhabitants.

Recommendations

1. There is a need to create affordable housing options for street children through subsidised housing initiatives, social housing projects, and private developer partnerships to stop homelessness.
2. Accessible education should be ensured through the removal of financial barriers, the distribution of free supplies, and flexible learning programs that include mobile classrooms and evening programs.
3. Train law enforcement in child rights and develop safe reporting systems which allow street children to report abuse without disclosure of their identity.
4. The healthcare system should offer mobile clinics, free basic medical care, and specialised service referrals to street children while eliminating the need for them to provide identification for access.
5. Provide psychological assistance and vocational training to develop emotional strength and essential job skills to help street children transition into independent self-sufficiency.
6. Structured programs with financial support and community-based alternatives should be available to street children who cannot return home for substance abuse rehabilitation and family reintegration.

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