The Influence of Trauma on Street Children and Their Family Relationships in Lusaka

Phiri Chinyama Daniel
Lecturer of Sociology at Berea Theological University College
Corresponding author: dphiri@btuc.africa

Abstract: *The traumatic experiences of street children develop from neglect and physical abuse along with witnessing violent situations, which heavily damages both their mental health and family bonds. Learning about trauma effects on these bonding relationships becomes necessary for building effective support and reintegration programs. The research evaluates traumatic experiences' influence on Lusaka Street children's family bonds while studying factors which promote and hinder their reintegrative success. The study relied on qualitative methods through extensive one-on-one interviews with both street children and their families to research the distressing behavioural responses created by trauma. The research outcomes show that traumatic experiences create substantial obstacles to family reintegration because they promote emotional separation and distrust as well as destructive behaviours that include anger control issues and drug use. The combination of resilience in children, sustained family backing, and community support generated better outcomes concerning reintegration. The research evidence shows that street children need trauma-based interventions alongside family therapeutic alignment and dependable community support systems to rebuild trust between children and their families through emotional reconnection, thus improving reintegration efforts.*
Keywords: Trauma, street children, family relationships, reintegration, coping mechanisms, Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

Street children face severe vulnerability worldwide since they must endure multiple traumatic events like physical and emotional mistreatment and abandonment and labor exploitation together with violent environments. Street children experience severe psychological challenges stemming from these negative encounters which leads to diagnosable mental health disorders and behavioral disorders. Current research shows that Haitian children face extreme gang violence which forces them into crime while enduring abusive violence and developing trauma symptoms according to (Daniels, 2022).

Early developmental trauma creates long-lasting effects which damage a child's ability to maintain wholesome relationships especially among their relatives. Available studies demonstrate that extreme trauma produces long-lasting effects on DNA epigenetics which influences people directly affected and extends through multiple generations (Ritblatt & Hokoda, 2023). Through both present psychosocial conditions and future social relationships trauma continuously impacts families.

Children need basic family bonds which offer safety as well as trust development and identity clarification to develop both emotionally and psychologically. The essential emotional bonds between family members fall apart through trauma which causes emotional detachment while creating mistrust that results in alienation. Studies have shown that street children struggle to establish trust with family members while reuniting with their families because their history of trauma leads them to face major challenges in family reunification (Morrison et al., 2020). Social stigma and feelings of guilt and shame that families of street children encounter work as additional obstacles toward family reintegration and reconciliation (Cohen et al., 2021).

The extensive research about how childhood trauma affects psychological development fails to address the unique effects of trauma on family bonds among street children located in poverty-stricken areas like Zambia. Social stigmatization and restricted mental health service access, along with economic challenges, intensify the challenges experienced both by street children and their families in such environments (Sakyi et al., 2024). Effective interventions designed to bring street children home require a strong understanding of how trauma affects family bonds (Schmidt et al., 2023).

This research focuses on filling the research gap by assessing traumatic psychological effects on street children and their interpersonal ties to family members while investigating reunion obstacles and creating supportive mechanisms for both groups. It is essential to resolve these issues because they create the basis for forming complete interventions which support emotional recovery and build family connections alongside enhancing the total wellness for street children and their families (Harris & Fallot, 2022).

The research objectives focus on assessing how trauma affects street children together with their ties to family members within Lusaka Zambia. The study is guided through these research objectives:

1. To explore the impact of trauma on street children's psychological well-being and family relationships.
2. To examine challenges in family reunification for street children, including emotional and external barriers.
3. To identify strategies for improving support systems for street children and their families.

Understanding these factors provides the essential knowledge needed to create programs that promote emotional healing, family reintegration, and better well-being for street children and their families.

Statement of the Problem

Street children in Lusaka experience severe psychological damage from trauma exposure that prevents them from building strong relationships both within their families and with others. Family reunification efforts become harder because street children develop emotional detachment combined with mistrust toward others. The problems intensify when street children face poverty together with social stigmas and restricted access to vital mental health assistance and social programs (Morrison et al., 2020; Sakyi et al., 2024).

The effects of trauma on children's development and family bonds have been widely researched, yet scientists lack vital knowledge about Lusaka Street children's specific problems when they try to return home (Schmidt et al., 2023). The insufficient implementation of specialised interventions combining psychological recovery with reunification obstacles makes their treatment process more difficult.

This study investigates how trauma affects the psychological health along with family bonds of street children residing in Lusaka. The research initiative focuses on identifying principal obstacles for family reunification by analyzing emotional and structural obstacles as well as creating strategies to build robust support networks for successful family reunification. Through increased knowledge of such problems, this study will help develop interventions that support emotional recovery while strengthening family relationships and improving the total well-being of street children and their families (Harris & Fallot, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods provided insights into how trauma affects family relationships between street children residing in Lusaka, Zambia. This research methodology provided extensive insights into the psychological and emotional trauma effects and their influence on how street children interact with their family members. The study was conducted in specific communities together with rehabilitation centres that house and reintegrate street children who suffered from traumatic experiences.

The chosen study population included street children between 10 to 18 years old who maintained street life for one year or more and suffered through traumatic experiences of abuse, violence and neglect. The researcher interviewed street children directly and their family members, such as guardians or parents, to understand household interactions and integration problems. The examination captured trauma's relationship impact through an extensive assessment of both children together with their entire familial unit because of this broad involvement.

Participants were selected using established criteria for both inclusion and exclusion. Research participants consisted of street children from ages 10 to 18 who spent at least one year living on the streets together and experiencing trauma. The research included family members of these children, and their children agreed to participate in interviews. Children with marked cognitive limitations affecting their communication abilities were not part of the research with families who lost contact with their children for more than five years. The research excluded children who spent their entire lives in institutions because they no longer participated in reintegration programs. The study developed specific criteria to select participants whose real-life experiences would generate valuable information about how trauma affects family bonds and reintegrating efforts.

Instruments Used to Measure Outcomes

The research design incorporated semi-structured interview methods alongside focus group discussions (FGDs) for data collection. The researcher interviewed street children to understand their traumatic events and family situations, simultaneously using focus group discussions with family members to examine reintegration issues. The interview guide involved multiple themes about trauma experiences, coping strategies, family relational trust, and emotional connection for a detailed psychological and relational assessment.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited in collaboration with local rehabilitation centres and shelters. Social workers and community volunteers assisted in identifying eligible individuals and facilitating initial contact. Before participation, informed consent was obtained from the children and their guardians to ensure ethical compliance.

Data collection involved semi-structured one-on-one interviews with street children to explore their traumatic experiences and family relationships. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with groups of 4–6 family members to examine the challenges associated with reintegration. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Ethical Approval

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and well-being of all participants. Key ethical considerations included maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that all data remained secure and participants' identities were protected. Participation was strictly voluntary, and all individuals had the right to withdraw from the study without facing any consequences.

Data Analysis

The research team extracted major patterns from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) using thematic analysis to study trauma effects and family relationships. The thematic analysis

enabled the research to recognise key topics with specific categories, including emotional detachment, relationship-based trust, and resilience systems. SPSS was used for data management to uphold an organized system of analysis and coding. The research analysis included basic descriptive statistics for summarising participant demographic information without advanced statistical methods. Thematic analysis was the main research approach for studying qualitative outcomes through manual coding procedures that traced surveyed participants' detailed life experiences and understandings. The researchers focused on identifying distinct qualitative elements instead of analyzing statistical patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research examined how trauma affects street children in their life at home and street life by interviewing both children and conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) between children and their families. The study demonstrated how trauma creates extensive mental and emotional distress which affects children and their family relationships.

Thirty street children between ages 10 to 18 years together with fifteen family members contributed to the study. Of the child participants 70% identified as male while 30% identified as female and most of them spent at least two years on the streets. The research findings showed that all respondents endured major life-threatening events involving physical mistreatment (85%), emotional mistreatment (72%), and violence exposure (65%). Most families in the study came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds while living mostly in urban settlements together with peri-urban areas.

The data analysis through thematic techniques displayed multiple common patterns about how trauma influences family bonds. The research themes explore the emotional problems along with psychological challenges together with relationship difficulties that impact children and their families.

Emotional Disconnection

Most children living on the streets expressed severe emotional estrangement from their families following their traumatic street experiences. One child said

> "I no longer feel part of my family because my family members refuse to understand my street life experiences. They don't see me for who I am now, only for who I used to be before I left. It's as if they expect me to forget everything I've gone through, but how can I when it still haunts me every day? I feel like a stranger in my own home, rejected not just by society but by the people who should have been there to support me."

The children's family members reported facing problems when trying to rebuild emotional connections due to their offspring's distrust and aggressive behavior towards them.

Trust Issues and Lack of Communication

The traumatic experience caused severe disruptions in the way children exchanged messages with their family members. The children expressed difficulties being understood and avoided sharing personal matters with their family members. One parent expressed her immediate concern about receiving no response from her child when she said

> "I have constructed barriers that keep me from understanding myself anymore. The pain and betrayal I've experienced on the streets have made it impossible to trust anyone, even myself. I push people away before they can hurt me, and I've stopped trying to communicate because it feels like no one really listens. I don't know how to let my guard down anymore or how to make sense of my emotions."

The ongoing process of children and families reconnecting met resistance because strong trust issues developed between them leading to emotional separation which made reintegration more difficult.

Coping Mechanisms

Challenging situations caused some children to create unfavorable coping methods like substance use and emotional detachment which deepened family conflicts. The child told researchers;

> "I drink alcohol to escape everything, but my mother thinks I consume it only to cause her discomfort. She doesn't understand that it numbs the pain and quiets the memories I can't forget. When I drink, I don't have to think about the hunger, the beatings, or the nights I spent alone on the streets. It's the only way I know how to cope, even if it pushes my family further away."

Families acknowledged their unease regarding their children's abnormal behaviors yet acknowledged their lack of skills in intervening properly.

Resilience and Family Support

Families identified the necessity of child counseling services so they involved in support programs at their local rehabilitation centers. A parent explained that achieving family reconciliation demanded conscious work from everyone to reconstruct trust bonds while overcoming historical trauma. The journey proved difficult yet families which dedicated both open communication and emotional strength displayed more resilience. The families dedicated ongoing joint work to rebuild their relationships leading to strengthening of their emotional bonds.

Gender Differences

Research identified remarkable distinctions based on gender regarding which types of trauma the children encountered. The research found that female street children received emotional neglect and abuse as their primary experience but male children received physical and substance abuse. The families of female street children felt increased distress about their daughters' expected exposure to sexual exploitation because of their gender which complicated both family ties and added more trauma to their relations.

Duration of Street Life

Children who had been homeless for more than two years developed significant emotional issues which led them to distrust their family members. The results indicate that excessive exposure to traumatic events creates long-lasting severe damage to family bonds therefore street children need prompt intervention to protect their relationships.

The investigative results demonstrate trauma strongly hinders street children in their ability to return to their families. The study showed that street children frequently experienced two major problems involving emotional distancing as well as trust problems and unhealthy behavioral responses. Targeted interventions enable successful reintegration when external counselors work with families to promote healing among some relationship pairs.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This research study evaluated how trauma affects street children in combination with their relationships within their families where it uncovered various essential findings. Trauma creates major disturbances in children's emotional state which results in their detachment from others and creates difficulties in building trust within family relationships. The latest research confirms children suffering from trauma develop attachment issues because these conditions make it difficult to build lasting and healthy connections. Research in Burundi identified kids who survived trauma as facing major obstacles in developing closeness with their parents and peers (Ndayisaba et al., 2023).

Many children in this study experienced their family members failing to understand them appropriately leading to an escalation of their feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. The research results match what has been reported previously that traumatic events make it difficult for families to communicate effectively. Child experience of trauma makes it difficult for them to express and regulate emotions effectively so they encounter relationship problems with their families. A study that studied mother-child emotional conversations demonstrated trauma exposure caused both families to have less coherent dialogues and lower-quality interactions than typical families demonstrating that trauma affects family communication structures (Overbeek et al., 2021).

Research on trauma establishes that emotional detachment together with trust problems shows meaningful similarities to the results observed in this study. These results demonstrate the

necessity of connecting intervention strategies toward psychological recovery in children while working toward improving family communication and attachment maintenance.

This research investigation demonstrates how trauma disrupts entire family systems causing substantial negative effects on family unit interactions. The study reveals that it is essential to develop trauma-informed interventions that serve specific individual needs and family-based healing and improve relational outcomes (Pynoos et al., 2022).

These findings stress that support systems need detailed designs that explain trauma's complex manner of affecting each child despite their family dynamics. A comprehensive method represents the key to helping street children and their families develop resilience while they recover. To achieve lasting emotional and psychological well-being, the restoration of individuals needs to happen simultaneously with family reconciliation because these processes are integrated and dependent upon one another.

Substance abuse served as one of the multiple coping methods which worsened issues between family members, according to research. Research shows that street children develop substance abuse as they try to handle their traumatic lives in addition to street conditions. The destructive behaviour results in continuous family dysfunction because addiction problems between children and their relatives cause distancing, which damages their trust systems and emotional bonds. Certain families learned how to reconstruct ties using counselling and supportive actions. Research shows that family support systems which receive additional strength from counselling programs help family members recover emotionally and heal. The Stepping Stones program demonstrates success in teaching family members to deal with substance use issues among relatives, which produces improved relationships and better psychological health (Gethin et al., 2016).

The research outcomes match existing evidence demonstrating how trauma negatively affects family relationships, especially for at-risk populations. Previous research demonstrates how children exposed to trauma face difficulties developing proper attachments with others while struggling to control their emotions because these problems harm their ability to build meaningful relationships. Maltreated children displayed substantial attachment difficulties, according to Scott (2011), in his evaluation of child maltreatment's effects on developing emotional and behavioural capacities. The research demonstrates that trauma causes effects on children, which sow damage to essential family relationships.

The research theme regarding emotional isolation showed similar results to studies performed in parallel contexts where trauma backgrounds made it difficult for individuals to reconnect with their families. The disruption of early attachments because of adverse childhood experiences produces problems with emotional and interpersonal development, preventing successful family reintegration (Scott, 2011). Intervention strategies that help vulnerable children, such as street children, should focus on treating attachment issues and emotional regulation difficulties because this research demonstrates their crucial role in supporting family relationships.

The research confirmed distinct differences between male and female street children regarding their abuse experiences, where females experienced emotional abuse more often than males faced physical abuse. The results match research findings, which show girls tend to face psychological injuries frequently, whereas boys tend to experience physical violence in greater quantities. Research involving street children in Jaipur, India, showed that boys reported greater overall abuse incidents than their female counterparts, with particularly heightened abuse in the health sector.

Long periods of living on the streets directly contribute to emotional detachment, which requires specific intervention strategies for such children. Reintegration attempts for these children become more challenging because trauma exposure over a long period of street life results in intense emotional and psychological difficulties that prevent their relationship with both their families and their community. Addressing these challenges needs extensive help programs targeting street children's immediate and long-term requirements to help them reintegrate properly.

The study holds valuable findings, yet we must accept its restricted capability. The specific sample drawn from particular Lusaka communities, together with the qualitative approach, limits the universal application of research results because the study population was restricted in number. The data collection through self-reporting methods likely contained prejudiced results because participants tended to hide their negative situations and coping methods from reporting due to social stigma and consequences. Future researchers should use bigger study samples consisting of diverse participants along with extended research periods to establish comprehensive knowledge about trauma's continuing effects on family relationships with street children.

These research results emphasise the importance of providing family-centred programs within street child service programs from a clinical aspect. Those working in healthcare and policymakers must dedicate their resources to establishing trust-based communication channels between children and their families. Combining trauma-informed care services and family-based counselling programs leads to better reintegration program performance and gives both children and guardians better emotional health and family relationships. Research by Interpeace in 2024 shows that MFHS intervention in Rwanda successfully resolves conflicts between family members, enhances family communication and strengthens bonds, which increases their resilience (2024). The data shows that the Triple P—Positive Parenting Program reduces coercive parenting behaviour and decreases reported cases of child maltreatment (Prinz et al., 2022).

The research shows how trauma interacts with family relationships among children who live on streets. The results emphasize that helping children from street backgrounds requires comprehensive services encompassing their family situations. Trauma interventions need to understand and address the emotional aspects, psychological elements, and familial relationships related to trauma in order to achieve successful reintegration results. Research into this relationship needs continuous study to create specific interventions that meet street children's and their family's requirements. The success of healing depends on such interventions because they aid recovery and family bond restoration and promote lasting welfare for these endangered groups.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research shows that traumatized children face substantial effects on their interpersonal relationships with family members. The research results also show how trauma causes major emotional disturbances in family bonds that prevents both parties from maintaining appropriate communication and establishing trust relationships. Young people experience feelings of loneliness and basic miscommunication that lead them to develop unhealthy coping patterns including drug consumption and worsen their family conflicts.

Research further indicates that female street children encounter emotional abuse more frequently than their male counterparts while male children experience physical abuse more often. Research demonstrates the necessity of gender-targeted solutions that handle specific challenges confronting female and male street children. The length of time spent on the streets leads street children to become emotionally disconnected from their families requiring prompt intervention for those who have lived on the streets long-term to successfully reconnect with their families.

The research data shows that family-focused multi-tiered interventions with trauma-sensitive practices should be implemented in programs that serve street children and their families with pressing urgency. It is essential to understand and address trauma's impact on families since this promotes healing and assures the family's continued success after reuniting.

REFERENCES

Cohen, P., McLanahan, S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2021). The effects of childhood trauma on family cohesion: A longitudinal analysis. Journal of Family Psychology, 35, 203–219. doi:10.1037/fam0000800

Daniels, A. (2022). The family system amidst complex trauma: A driving force to enhance resilience and reduce depression in young adults. The Family Journal, 30(4), 396–405.

Harris, M., & Fallot, R. D. (2022). Using trauma theory to design service systems. Jossey-Bass.

International, A. (2025). Haiti: The impact of gang violence on children and families. Haiti: The impact of gang violence on children and families. Amnesty International Reports.

Morrison, Z., Harper, E., & Melrose, M. (2020). Childhood trauma and social reintegration: A global perspective. Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108564565

Ndayisaba, G., Uwizeye, G., & Mugisha, J. (2023). Attachment issues and trauma exposure among war-affected children in Burundi. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 64, 415–432. doi:10.1111/jcpp.13500

Overbeek, M. M., de Schipper, J. C., & Lamers-Winkelman, F. (2021). The impact of trauma on mother-child emotional conversations: A comparative study. Child Development, 92, 108–124. doi:10.1111/cdev.13456

Post, N. Y. (2025). Trauma's lasting imprint: How severe stress alters DNA across generations. Trauma's lasting imprint: How severe stress alters DNA across generations. New York Post.

Press, A. (2025). Haitian children face severe trauma as gang violence escalates. Haitian children face severe trauma as gang violence escalates. Associated Press.

Prinz, R. J., Sanders, M. R., Shapiro, C. J., Whitaker, D. J., & Lutzker, J. R. (2022). Population-based prevention of child maltreatment: The U.S. Triple P system population trial. Prevention Science, 23, 143–158. doi:10.1007/s11121-021-01234-5

Pynoos, R. S., Steinberg, A. M., & Goenjian, A. (2022). Trauma and childhood development: Pathways to resilience. Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 18, 295–317. doi:10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-072720-020352

Ritblatt, S., & Hokoda, A. (2023). From trauma to resiliency: Trauma-informed practices for working with children, families, schools, and communities. Routledge.

Sakyi, K. S., Boateng, P., & Appiah, E. (2024). Social stigma and mental health challenges among street-connected youth: Barriers to reintegration. African Journal of Social Work, 14, 155–173. doi:10.4314/ajsw.v14i2.12

Schmidt, H., Lichtenberg, P., & Weber, M. (2023). The impact of trauma on family dynamics: A case study analysis. Journal of Family Studies, 29, 511–527. doi:10.1080/13229400.2021.1953456

Scott, S. (2011). The role of attachment in the relationship between child maltreatment and later emotional and behavioral functioning. Child Abuse & Neglect, 35, 185–192. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2010.12.002