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The family situation of street youth in  
Latin America: a cross-national review

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## The family situation of street youth in Latin America: a cross-national review

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One of the greatest social welfare challenges confronting Latin American nations is the growing number of children and adolescents seeking their survival on city streets. The presence of these apparently abandoned youngsters is not new (see Felsman, 1989; Peralta, 1992), but the number of street youths has been increasing steadily in recent years (Connolly, 1994; Durning, 1992). Although the exact numbers are disputed, most experts agree that millions of children and adolescents work and sometimes live on city streets in the developing countries of Latin America (UNICEF, 1989). In the face of what at times appears to be an insurmountable problem, a number of governmental and non-governmental programs have been developed, ranging from institutionalization to street education (Lusk, 1989). However, program development is hindered by a lack of systematic information about street children and their families of origin, and by definitional confusion over who these children are.

Within the last 10 years, street youth has received a great deal of attention in both the academic (e.g. Aptekar, 1988, Aptekar, 1994; Ennew, 1994) and popular (Larmer, 1992, Nixon, 1991) press. This increased attention has led to a growing awareness of how subgroups of youth differ in their family situations and daily experiences. Three main subgroups of street youth are found in the developing world (Barker and Knaul, 1991; Lusk, 1989,1992). The largest group is children “in” the street (working youth), who work at street-based jobs (e.g. shining shoes, selling candy, washing cars) and return to their family at night or at weekends. Some investigators differentiate between two subgroups of working youth: family-based street workers, who live at home full-time, and independent street workers, who reside on the street part-time (e.g. Lusk, 1992). The second group consists of children “of”

the street (homeless youth), who have left home to live on the streets and survive by engaging in a variety of activities (e.g. scavenging, begging, stealing). The third group is children of street families, who live in family groups in public locations due to unavailability of affordable housing; little is known about these youngsters (Lusk, 1992).

Most analysts agree that the primary cause of street youth in developing countries is poverty and the stress it imposes on families (e.g. Canizosa and Poertner, 1992; Lusk, 1989; Peralta, 1992), although others argue that cultural factors play an important role (Aptekar, 1994). Structural factors contributing to the presence of street youth include high birth rates, rural-to-urban migration, inadequate housing, economic stagnation, unequal distribution of income and the absence of government assistance programs (Barker and Knaul, 1991; Branford and Kucinski, 1988); in a subset of countries, war and the AIDS epidemic are also significant factors (Luna and Rotheram-Borus, 1992; Rutayuga, 1992). The present analysis focuses on Latin America, where structural factors combine to push millions of children onto the street to help generate the income families desperately need (Lusk, 1989; Peralta, 1992). The empirical literature supports the connection between family poverty and involvement in street work. For example, Rosa et al. (1992) found that economic necessity was the major factor differentiating between working and non-working youth from the same community in Recife, Brazil. Compared to non-working youngsters, workers were nine times more likely to be living in homes without running water, and four times more likely to be without toilet facilities. It should be noted that the majority of child workers are boys (Myers, 1989); impoverished girls tend to work in domestic positions or help out at home, and are thus less likely to be found in street settings (Connolly, 1990).

Although poverty is seen as the underlying cause of the street youth phenomenon, little is known about the factors that lead children onto different pathways once they are exposed to the street environment. It has been suggested that there is a progression from family-based street worker to independent street worker to homeless street youth, with some youngsters "evolving" to the next stage of street involvement at each step (e.g. Lusk, 1989). However, the specific factors that contribute to this evolution have not been identified in systematic research. In particular, the issue of why some youths remain attached to their family and maintain stable ties, while

others become disengaged and ultimately break their connection to the family, needs to be investigated. This information would permit assistance programs to focus their services more effectively by permitting a differentiation between the service needs of subsets of youth and their families. In the absence of research-based information, social welfare professionals may be forced to make decisions based on stereotypes or personal beliefs, rather than the reality of their clients' lives.

This paper examines the family situation of street youth in Latin America, where 40 percent of street youths are found (Barker and Knaul, 1991), and attempts to identify how subgroups of street youth differ in family characteristics. Publications and unpublished materials were obtained by conducting literature searches of psychological, medical and social work abstracts, requesting recent publications from street youth researchers in the US and Latin America and corresponding with contacts made while conducting research with Brazilian street youth. Comparison with other recent review articles (e.g. Aptekar, 1994) reveals that this strategy resulted in a comprehensive body of research. Only findings based on samples of at least 25 youths are reported in this review; in general, samples reflect the characteristics of the street youth population, being composed primarily of males aged 9–18 (average ages range from 11 to 14 years in most studies). Because most published articles do not present statistical tests in their comparisons of working and homeless youth, differences were tested by the author using the standard error of the difference between proportions (Loether and McTavish, 1974).

#### **Family characteristics of subgroups of street youth**

The first question to be investigated was whether the family characteristics of homeless and working youths differ. The main family characteristics researchers have focused on is parental loss or absence, physical or sexual abuse and migration.

##### *Parental loss or absence*

Contrary to early reports describing street youths as orphaned or abandoned, the majority of homeless and working youngsters assessed in empirical research do have living parents. The proportion of homeless youths who report being orphans is around 5–7 percent in most samples (e.g. Felsman, 1989; Wright et al., 1993; see also Harrison, in Asociación Salud con Prevención,

1992), compared to 2 percent of working youths reported by Wright et al. (1993). Although they are not “true” orphans, it appears that homeless youths are more likely to experience parental death or absence than working youths. Table 1 presents data from studies of homeless and working youths conducted by different researchers in three countries (Brazil, Mexico and Colombia). In all cases, homeless youths were less likely to have two parents in the home (whether because of parental death or absence) than working youths, although the differences were only significant for two of the four studies.

**TABLE 1**  
**Proportion of youths from two-parent families**

	Homeless youth (%)	Working youth (%)
Alves (1991) — Goiania, Brazil	42.5	49.6
Campos et al. (1994) — Belo Horizonte, Brazil	37.5	71.0 <sup>a</sup>
Lusk (1992) — Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	53.3	61.5 <sup>b</sup>
Peralta (1992) — Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	8.0	36.0 <sup>ac</sup>
Felsman (1989) — Bogota, Colombia	28.0	—

<sup>a</sup> Statistically significant difference between homeless and working youth ( $p < .05$ ) based on the standard error of the difference between proportions.

<sup>b</sup> Independent street workers; 59.1 percent of family-based street workers.

<sup>c</sup> Independent street workers; 22 percent of family-based street workers.

### *Abuse*

It is commonly thought that homeless youngsters are more likely to report experiencing physical abuse at home than working youngsters. As shown in Table 2, substantially more homeless youths do report being physically punished or abused at home, and two of the three comparisons are statistically significant. In addition, violence is often given as a reason for leaving home; 55 percent of one sample of Colombian homeless youth (Harrison, in *Asociación Salud con Prevención*, 1987), and 40 percent of a Brazilian sample (Hutz et al., 1995) said they left home because of family violence. Case history and anecdotal reports suggest that family disruption may lead to this increased abuse, because of either the stress associated with increased poverty or the presence of non-parental adults in the home (e.g. Campos et al., 1994; Connolly, 1990; Vasconcelos, 1991).

It should be noted that there is a methodological problem with these analyses of physical abuse, since youngsters are asked to report about events

**TABLE 2**  
**Proportion of youths with history of abuse**

	Homeless youth (%)	Working youth (%)
Alves (1991) — Goiania, Brazil	62.5	24.6 <sup>a</sup>
Lusk (1992) — Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	69.2	44.0 <sup>ab</sup>
Peralta (1992) — Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	44.0	28.0

<sup>a</sup> Statistically significant difference between homeless and working youth ( $p < .05$ ) based on the standard error of the difference between proportions.

<sup>b</sup> Independent street workers; 9.5 percent of family-based street workers.

that may have taken place years before. An interesting finding reported by Alves (1991) is that working youths living at home and their parents agree on parental use of corporal punishment (reported by 25 percent of children and 26.5 percent of parents) and verbal punishment (68 percent of children and 67 percent of parents). In contrast, when interviewed about disciplinary tactics prior to leaving home, homeless youths and their parents differ dramatically in reports of corporal punishment (39 percent of parents and 62.5 percent of children) and verbal punishment (61 percent of parents and 32.5 percent of children). This raises the question of whether homeless children’s retrospective reports exaggerate physical abuse, perhaps because youths are accustomed to seek sympathy from adults, or parental reports downplay physical punishment.

### *Migration*

Another common belief is that street youths have their origin in migrant families who come to urban centers in an attempt to escape rural poverty. Empirical reports suggest that this may be true in some cities but not in others. As shown in Table 3, three of five comparative studies find statistically significant differences in the proportion of homeless and working youth who come from migrant families. The contribution of migration to the creation of street youth is probably indirect, operating through the effects of family disruption and dependent on local economic and social conditions (e.g. availability of housing and schools).

### **Family relationships of subgroups of street youth**

The research reviewed in the previous section suggests that the family situation of homeless and working youth in Latin America differs, with more

TABLE 3

## Proportion of youths from migrant families

	Homeless youth (%)	Working youth (%)
Alves (1991) — Goiania, Brazil	39.0	43.5
Campos et al. (1994) — Belo Horizonte, Brazil	18.0	9.0 <sup>a</sup>
Lusk (1992) — Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	73.3	28.8 <sup>ab</sup>
Peralta (1992) — Ciudad Juarez, Mexico	52.0	58.0 <sup>c</sup>
Wright et al. (1993) — Tegucigalpa, Honduras	39.6	16.8 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Statistically significant difference between homeless and working youth ( $p < .05$ ) based on the standard error of the difference between proportions.

<sup>b</sup> Independent street workers; 13.6 percent of family-based street workers.

<sup>c</sup> Independent street workers; 43 percent of family-based street workers.

homeless youngsters experiencing family disruption, physical abuse and migration. Although it is likely that most youth go to the streets initially to work, we can speculate that youth from more disorganized or dysfunctional families will be more apt to drift away from their families and ultimately break off family ties. Although much has been made of the fact that the majority of street youths are not orphans, few researchers have examined whether youngsters can actually use their families as sources of help and support. A number of researchers have found that homeless street youths do not maintain ties with family members even if they are potentially available. For example, Felsman (1989) reports that although only 7 percent of Colombian street youths studied were orphaned or abandoned, under two-thirds (61%) maintained a relationship with their family. A similar proportion (64%) of street youths in Porto Alegre, Brazil, reported having contact with their family (Hutz et al., 1995); in another Brazilian city, only 17.5 percent of homeless youngsters reported daily or weekly family contact (Campos et al., 1994).

Perhaps a more important issue is whether homeless youths can turn to their families in time of crisis or as a last resort. Campos et al. (1994) compared social resources of 376 homeless and working youths in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and found that the homeless were significantly less likely to have someone who would give them a place to sleep, protection or help if they were injured or sick. For example, only 64.5 percent of homeless youths, compared to 90 percent of working youths, said they had someone to protect them. In addition, working youths were more likely to name relatives as sources of help whereas the homeless were more likely to name peers or

unrelated adults. Additional analyses of these data (Raffaelli, 1995) reveal that even when homeless youngsters have relatives in the same city (including parents, siblings and extended family members), they may not be able to turn to them in times of trouble. The majority (83%) of youths who always slept on the street ( $N = 152$ ) had extended family members in the same city. However, only one-fifth of youngsters with family members in the same city reported daily or weekly family contact; 65 percent reported occasional contact, and 15 percent said they never saw anyone from their family. Perhaps more importantly, when asked who they would turn to in time of trouble, the majority of these homeless youths selected a non-family member, and many reported not having anyone to turn to for help if they needed a place to sleep, were hurt or needed protection (see Table 4). These findings suggest that whatever the objective reality of their family situation, many homeless youngsters cannot turn to family members in times of trouble. The fact that nearly half (49%) of youths with relatives in the same city said they had nobody to protect them highlights that many homeless youths are effectively abandoned. The picture for the 26 youths with no relatives in the city was even bleaker; 85 percent said they had no one who would give them a place to sleep, 81 percent had no one to protect them and 58 percent had no one to turn to if they were hurt (Table 4).

### Discussion

The picture of Latin American street youth painted by the popular and academic press ranges from being one of abandoned children surviving without adult support (e.g. Agnelli, 1986; Hoge, 1983; Larmer, 1992) to being one of self-sufficient youngsters who have social networks to fall back on in times of trouble (e.g. Aptekar, 1994; Ennew, 1994). The findings reviewed in this paper suggest that neither picture is accurate, and that researchers must begin to take a more differentiated approach if their findings are to be useful to professionals who work with street youth and their families.

Children and adolescents surviving on the streets of Latin American cities have their origins in families that share a common condition of poverty. However, poverty in and of itself cannot explain the presence of homeless children and adolescents on city streets. Findings reviewed in this paper

TABLE 4

**Social resources reported by homeless youth in Belo Horizonte, Brazil**

	Relatives in city (n=128)(%)	No relatives in city (n=26)(%)
Someone helps if need place to sleep <sup>a</sup>		
No	36.7	84.6
Yes - relative	33.6	0.0
Yes - non-relative	29.7	15.4
Someone helps if hurt <sup>a</sup>		
No	23.6	57.7
Yes - relative	27.6	0.0
Yes - non-relative	48.8	42.3
Someone protects <sup>a</sup>		
No	48.8	80.8
Yes - relative	15.0	0.0
Yes - non-relative	36.2	19.2

Note n = 154 youths aged 9-18 who always sleep on street (for a full description of the study see Campos et al., 1994).

<sup>a</sup> Statistically significant difference ( $p < .01$ ), based on chi-square statistic.

suggest that the families of origin of impoverished youths may differ in ways that contribute to the progression of some children from working to homeless youth. Although caution must be taken in generalizing from the existing body of primarily small-scale, local, studies, the pattern of results suggests that homeless youths are more likely than working youths to be from troubled families. Research in the US reveals that the stresses of poverty do not fall equally on all families; rather, families differ in their ability to mediate the negative effects of poverty on their children (McLoyd and Wilson, 1991). It may be that differences in parental coping mechanisms, social networks and mental health are predictive of whether working youth will ultimately become street youth. This area of investigation merits the attention of researchers, who to date have focused on the children of Latin America's poorest families but have paid less attention to the families themselves.

Based on the cross-national findings reviewed in this paper, it appears that there are important differences in the needs of subgroups of street youth and their families. Although the majority of youngsters found on the street maintain family ties and may be living at home at least part-time (Rizzini and Lusk, 1995), most street youth programs do not work with families. There are a number of reasons for this apparent paradox, including earlier

beliefs that most street youths are orphaned or abandoned, the fact that most working youths are unsupervised in their daily activities on the street, and the reality that the families of origin of street youths are typically impoverished and disorganized. Current intervention programs for street youth vary greatly in ideology and methodology; Lusk (1989) has outlined four primary approaches varying in the degree to which they locate the "problem" within the individual or within the larger society (see also Carrizosa and Poertner, 1992). The correctional approach treats street youth as "delinquents"; this approach has resulted in the institutionalization of thousands of street children in "treatment centers" and reform schools. Programs using the rehabilitative approach attempt to reintegrate youth into mainstream society by remediating deficiencies in youngsters' skills and changing the way they interact with the world. The outreach approach draws on the model proposed by Paulo Freire (1973), who argued that the educational process must involve the learner as an active agent, not as a passive subject. The ultimate aim of the outreach approach is to empower youngsters by engaging them in problem-solving to improve their lives. These three approaches are similar in that they work primarily with youth. The fourth approach sees street youth as "one highly visible element of a much more fundamental issue—childhood poverty" (Lusk, 1989: 73) and is aimed at prevention. Ultimately, the preventive approach will be necessary to overcome the street youth problem; although structural factors are clearly outside the realm of social work interventions, some aspects of the problem are within the scope of local program planners and practitioners.

The largest subgroup of street youth consists of workers, who comprise approximately three-quarters of the youngsters found on the streets of Latin American cities (Barker and Knaul, 1991). The greatest challenge for practitioners is to help working youngsters maintain a connection to the world of family and work. To be successful, interventions should address the needs of families as well as children and aim at long-term change rather than short-term solutions. Successful interventions for children and adolescents include after-school programs, community day care and recreational centers, and apprenticeship programs that emphasize training for future careers while providing immediate financial support. Programs to strengthen impoverished families include the formation of community kitchens and gardens, housing collectives and small business cooperatives. (For examples of successful com-

munity programs, see Canizosa and Poertner, 1992; Garrison and Landim, 1995; Lusk, 1989; Tyler et al., 1992.) In addition, the provision of health and family planning services are essential components of any social welfare intervention. Programs that reduce family stress and enable families to plan and provide for their children will ultimately lead to a reduction in the number of youngsters who must go to the street to work and risk homelessness.

Although youngsters who have left their families to adopt the “alternative lifestyle” of the street represent a minority of all street youth, they pose a serious public policy and social welfare challenge. Research reviewed in this paper suggests that, although homeless children and adolescents typically have at least one living parent, they may be psychological orphans, unable to return home in times of trouble. Because of family dysfunction or extreme poverty, it may not be feasible or even desirable to attempt to reunite these children with their families (Tyler et al., 1992). As discussed earlier, a number of approaches for working with homeless youth have been developed. In a critique of street youth programs, Carrizosa and Poertner (1992) outlined the shortcomings of the correctional approach, which include the questionable assumption that all street youth are criminals, the high cost of maintaining youngsters in institutions and the negative impact of institutionalization on long-term development. The outreach approach is more viable in its ability to reach large numbers of children where they actually live, but the ultimate success of street-based programs is questionable, given the dangers of living on the street and the difficulty of moving from street life into mainstream society. In the words of one experienced youth educator, “[t]here is no rehabilitation on the street . . . salvage work means setting limits, and the street knows no limits” (Vasconcelos, 1991: 3). Most street youth advocates believe that homeless youngsters need a safe living situation off the street, where they can participate in creating an alternative to the families they have lost (e.g. Tyler et al., 1992). The role of social workers and other service providers in promoting positive youth development in these alternative settings is critical (Carrizosa and Poertner, 1992).

It is clear that there is no one solution to the complex and multifaceted challenge posed by street youth. In a time of growing poverty and diminishing financial resources, social welfare programs must be innovative and comprehensive, involving multiple approaches tailored to different subgroups of youth. Given the scope of the street youth problem, and the fact

that the social conditions that created this phenomenon show few signs of changing in the immediate future, there is an urgent need for research that assists practitioners and policy-makers to develop intervention programs to strengthen families and decrease the number of children on the streets.

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