THE STREET CHILDREN AND HOMELESS YOUTH

Aristotle University, Thessaloniki

Research Organisation

The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki is a state institution established in 1925. It includes 8 Schools and 41 Departments and is the largest institution of higher education in Greece (more than 65,000 students study in the University and the teaching and research staff is approximately 2000. It has been involved in many European Programmes such as ERASMUS, COMET, LINGUA, TEMPUS, SOCRATES etc.

Research Partner organisation

The Intercultural Education Partnership UK
The Intercultural Education Partnership is a non-profit making association of practitioners and academics to facilitate the exchange of professional papers and experience associated with the education of children and young people from minority backgrounds.
The “Hansefrauen” is a non-profit organisation.

Key words

- Coping strategies
- Homeless
- Street children
- Marginalized people
- Youth.
- Refugees.
- Racial harassment

Research subject

The study investigates street and homeless marginalised youth, their problems and coping strategies from an international comparative perspective. The study focuses on the specific problem of street children in the three countries concerned (Greece, Germany and the United Kingdom).

Methodology / Methods

Due to diversity of the phenomenon of street children, different pilot projects were carried out in each country using their own methodology and tools, such as reviews, interviews and questionnaires.

Abstract

This study focuses on the problems and coping strategies of marginalised street and homeless youth, in Greece, Germany and the UK. The main research objectives are to review and explore
the multidimensional factors creating high risk situations under which children and youth find themselves in the streets and marginalised, exploited and victimised. It was also aimed to investigate their problems on the personal, social, legal and state policy levels through small-scale pilot projects. To do this, we used our own methodology and tools, such as reviews, interviews and questionnaires. The main results were a clear definition of the profile of the street child and secondly, recommendations for research which would analyse as far as possible common factors in the street children problem.

**Research Objectives**

To review and explore the multidimensional factors creating high risk situations under which children and youth find themselves in the streets and marginalised, exploited and victimised.

To investigate, by means of small-scale pilot projects their problems on the personal, social, legal and state policy levels.

Wherever possible, to compare findings from one country with the others.

**Main Research Results**

It is generally accepted that economic, political and social life crises create high risk situations, particularly among underprivileged and disadvantaged social groups. Children, as members of such groups, undergo the consequences of these situations by becoming victims as well as victimisers, while living and/or working in the streets.

There is increasing interest among national and international agencies and social scientists to detect the factors creating high risk situations for the social and psychological development of these children. It seems that a variety of situational factors are responsible for the appearance of what has been called the Street child population; they could be summarised in three broad areas:

1. Families that maltreat their children and/or exploit them.
2. Socially and economically disadvantaged families, neighbourhoods and societies marked by unemployment, poverty, crime and violence.
3. Children who live in war zones.

**Governmental Policy on Street children**

The general consensus between the countries reviewed appeared to be that governments did not do enough either to help street children in a practical supportive way or to confront the causes that lead to children turning to the street. The problem is seen as the responsibility of the individual and people between the ages of 16 and 18 are not entitled to income support or housing. As a result it is left to private and voluntary organisations to take initiatives to support street children, and where the state has set up hostels they have been left to voluntary organisations to run and maintain.

Finally the old pillars of the family and schools were seen as no longer sufficient in supporting minors. New legislation hands over responsibility to voluntary organisations and provides them with access to funds.

In summary, it would seem that where support for street children is provided by governments it is in the form of shelters, day centres and/or educational intervention, as it seems that one cause of children turning to the streets (although not full-time) is dissatisfaction with school. Other preventative work is done in providing support to families. However, much of this work is under-researched or badly coordinated between government departments, central and local government or different social-welfare
services. In many cases great responsibility is given to private and voluntary organisations.

**Street Children projects in Greece**

Four pilot studies were carried out. They concerned:

- The child care organisations' level of awareness and readiness to deal with street children in Thessaloniki.
- The existing views about the reasons for and the consequences of the street child phenomenon as represented in the written Mass Media (magazines and newspapers).
- The way the children who live or work on the street perceive the social reality of themselves and their families.
- A first explorative investigation of juvenile delinquent services: facing the problem in Athens.

The aims of each organisation depended on the needs of the population seeking their help and their services cover children or youth aged from 2 to 20. A variety of services are offered by the municipal authorities and communities and all are financed by the state. The main problem that was detected in the case of most of these organisations was the lack of support in the community for solving the problems faced by these children. Also there was no interest in and/or awareness of unprotected children and/or street children. Therefore, for the organisations to offer any kind of help to street children they need to reformulate their aims, functions, and general policy.

But what do the street children say? Their account presents a different reality. The Greek researchers found that the children differed in the following areas:

1. The family situation (some lived in orphanages, some with other adults and some alone).
2. Educational status (some attended school, some had already stopped).
3. The kind of work (some sold flowers, some begged or cleaned car windows).
4. The way they confront their problems which interestingly enough seemed to depend on the amount of contact they had with their family.

**Findings from the first explorative research work on street children/juvenile delinquents**

Investigation revealed that there is no agency in Athens exclusively devoted to street children. However, there are many services devoted to the protection of children and juveniles in general and specifically juvenile delinquents. These services come into contact with street children.

**Street children project in Germany NEUE BUNDESLANDER**

The region where the present group worked and intends to work in the future is situated in eastern Germany, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, which belonged to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). It is one of the five Neue Bundeslander in Germany where dramatic social transformation and economic change is taking place.

Results from analysis of the questionnaire that social workers had to respond to describe severe social problems which the families have to cope with such as money problems, increasing unemployment, broken homes, credit and debt. There are psychological problems as well: parents who exclude their children, parents who expect too much of their children, thus preventing them from developing their own identity. There are families with severe drug and psychological problems, who can no longer take care of their children, leading to many kinds of neglect.

On the basis of the above findings the following proposals were made:
a) To complete our knowledge of street children so as to learn more about what they think. Therefore it is important to talk to them, visit them where they live, but not necessarily in order to change them into normal citizens; rather to learn about their way of looking at life. The intention to help should not involve changing their personality, but should offer practical advice, medical help, money and last but not least, someone to trust. This could be the job of street workers. Step by step, a help network encompassing homes, school and vocational training organisations could be built up.

b) To formulate guiding principles for work with street children. This is also important because it would enrich social work.

c) To make efforts to guarantee protection of children’s rights at all levels of institutional intervention. As long as the family is regarded as the only agent which is competent to bring up the child, there are no legal channels to enable acceptance of certain ways of life. It must become possible to isolate children’s rights from family arbitrariness.

Street Children Project – Intercultural Education Partnership UK. UK Pilot Study – Repeat Victimisation and Refugees

Population researched

Initial research has focused on the refugee population, either children, young adults or adults caring for children, in the area covered by the education section of the Refugee Council, the All London Steering Group on Refugee Education, which is comprised of education officers and teachers working to meet the needs of the school-based refugee and asylum seeking population.

Findings

a) Based on the data collected by Guimba-Mincher, an initial analysis shows that 58.9% of the members of the refugee community who were interviewed about racial harassment had kept quiet about the incident and did not report it as they believed that nothing could be done about it. Additionally they were afraid to complain because of their refugee or asylum seeking status. They stated that they just tolerated it and learned to live with it.

b) Some declared that they would report it to their own cultural organisation or support group and in some instances to their local refugee council but they did not want to bring it to the proper authorities for action.

c) It was further noted that the young refugees (age 16-30) were often involved in fights as a result of racial victimisation.

d) Of 36 incidents of racial harassment reported to local refugee councils in one area, 13 (36%) had reported the crime to their local Police Force. Of those, 12 (92%) had involved actual violence against the individual or their home. Of the 23 (64%) incidents not reported, a further 9 (36%) included physical violence against the victim.

e) Additional data from the Refugee Council on racist incidents against newly arrived refugee children shows that in one borough, 57.6 % (19 out of 33) young refugees had reported incidents of bullying within school and of those (36.8%) had chosen to change schools to avoid further incidents.

f) Initial indications from the Police data on repeat victimisation and the initial work of Guimbar-Mincher would tend to suggest that as a vulnerable group, refugees are likely to be the victims of repeat occasions of crime and that early indications are that they are less likely to report that crime because of their previous experiences. The data that are available relate to racist incidents only, the problem could be wider in scope.

Conclusions from the main Research Results

The future of street children

The literature review and the conclusions and proposals of the study group offer a variety of suggestions regarding practical ways of helping street children. Some stress issues regarding accommodation and education. Some suggest that outreach work should be emphasised with a
need to establish relationships with street children before anything else is attempted. There is an increasing focus on problems of multi-cultural conflict and an increased tendency to crack down on squatters and criminalise homeless people. Worries are sometimes centred around drug abuse and very often the need for an increase in public awareness is emphasised. There is great concern about the growing numbers of street children and some countries, such as Italy (Council of Europe, 1994) suggest that a global policy on juvenile problems should be adopted.

The study group considered it necessary: first, to provide a clear definition of the street child profile to be used by the group, taking into account the differences between countries, and particularly the three countries involved in this study. And second, to suggest research actions which would analyse as far as possible common factors in the problem of street children.

The definition
As definitions vary so widely across different countries the term “street child” was used to encompass any child or adolescent under the age of 18 who works and/or lives in the street, alone or with his/her family, or asylum seekers who are technically homeless and without support.

Furthermore, it was considered that it is not feasible to merely take a definition (or similarly an intervention programme) from one country and apply it to another, since issues, needs and problems differ in more than one way. However, in terms of future research it would probably be important to draw parallels and make assumptions about the realities of street children’s lives. It is important and necessary that we look into the different aspects and forms of the street child experience, with particular reference to one common factor – the vulnerability of these children.

It has been established through the pilot studies and information exchanges in the project meetings that there are different types and forms of the street children problem in the three studied countries:

Greece’s street children usually belong to a minority group (mainly refugees and Gypsies) living and/or working in the street, with or without family support. Germany on the other hand has only indigenous populations of street children, (mainly runaways) living and/or working in the street, while in the UK all kinds of street children are to be found, minority groups, runaways, refugees, travelling families etc. Therefore, the population selected would mainly depend on the particular interests and resources available to each team.

Proposed Action
The vulnerability factor of these children could be researched in the following three broad areas, always bearing in mind the different conditions and populations in each country:

1. The street children themselves, from infants up to adolescents of 18 years of age, should be studied. It was found that those in the streets are mainly adolescents but there are also infants with their mothers. This study could be performed through a variety of approaches, such as interviews, focus groups and action groups (e.g. education in situ, self-help, housing projects etc.). These could be carried out in local Youth Centres/Services/Organisations and Shelters. Attention should be paid to the culture effects of the interviewer/ animator.

2. A description of the reporting processes, legal or illegal, involving street children should be carried out. It would be useful to compare the professional ideology/culture involved in such processes to the actual practices in areas covering social services, education, community services, housing welfare, judicial and criminal.

3. The Mass Media effect should be studied where possible:
a) by looking into the way they present and analyse the street child problem in particular instances and b) by comparing the media presentations with the reality of experiences presented by the street children themselves and their own perception of the same instances.