Street Children in Ukraine: Homelessness and Other Associated Risks

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Abstract

As Ukraine transitions to a market economy and undergoes the process of globalization, street children number in the tens of thousands. They are drawn to the streets by various economic, political, and cultural factors such as extreme poverty, adverse life experiences, family deterioration, and orphanhood. Street children in Ukraine are at high risk of HIV infection, police harassment, abuse, violence, and negative mental health outcomes. Efforts thus far have been through legislative, preventative, and rehabilitative endeavors by governmental and non-governmental organizations. This article explores the issue of street children in Ukraine and outlines recommendations for future action and policy.

Keywords: street children; Ukraine; homelessness; policy; child welfare

Street Children in Ukraine: Homelessness and Other Associated Risks

Background

Estimates suggest that tens of millions of children are considered to be street children (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2012a). To describe this phenomenon many definitions of what constitutes a 'street child' exist among governing bodies and non-governmental organizations. For example, UNICEF introduced the concept of children 'of' or 'on' the street to distinguish between street-based and home-based children. Children 'of' the street are characterized as having a family accessible yet they choose to live on the street, or they have no family or home accessible and live on the street; and children 'on' the street are generally child workers who return home to their families at night. Children 'of' the street are only a small proportion of all street children, taking children 'on' the street into account (Easton et al., 1994). Interestingly, the children themselves tend to not accept the 'of'/'on' conceptualization to define their experience (Panter-Brick, 2002, p. 150). In Ukrainian law, street children are defined as either having been abandoned by their parents, or themselves having left family or institutional care where they have been raised, and having no fixed residence (Law of Ukraine, 2001, Article 2). With this legal definition in mind, this article explores the issue of street children in Ukraine and outlines recommendations for future action and policy.

To understand the phenomenon of street children in Ukraine, it is essential to review the development of child welfare services in the country. Historically, parentless children in Ukraine were raised either by extended family, in institutions, or in foster care-like settings. Then, in the 20th century, a number of events put more children at risk for becoming homeless such as the purging of high-income farmers around 1924, the famine genocide which killed millions from 1933-1934, and World War II, which was associated with a doubling of the number of institutions. The number of orphans continued to increase throughout the duration of the Soviet

Union's reign, due in part to a fluctuation in policies pertaining to the prevention of homelessness, mainly through institutional means and also by foster care (Lough & Panos, 2003).

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 gave rise to new challenges to the people of Ukraine when they proclaimed their independence in 1991. Accompanied by a loss of traditional social services and other difficulties, the country's transition to a market economy was associated with negative indicators for child well-being including increased rates of juvenile delinquency, drug use, street children, and adolescent suicide through the mid-1990s (UNICEF, 2001, p. 7). Families struggled to provide for themselves and there was little support available to them, some poverty-stricken families yielded their children to institutional care to ensure basic needs were met.

Despite this difficult period, Ukraine demonstrated its recognition of the importance of child welfare by ratifying the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC; 1989) in 1991 (UNICEF, 2012b). In particular, the preamble states:

“Convinced that the family as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community, Recognizing the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding,” (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Additionally, Article 27 states that every child has a right “to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (CRC, 1989). These

statements describing children's rights suggest that street children in Ukraine have a legally recognized right to better circumstances.

Prevalence

Statistics vary on the number of street children in Ukraine. Official data are unavailable, though government estimates cited in academic journals tend to include the 2003 approximation of 50,000 (e.g., Busza, et al., 2011; Kerfoot, et al., 2007). These data have been described as being collected from street shelters; also the number of children known to not be attending any formal school serves as a reference point (UNICEF, 2010, p. 177). However, state statistics tend to be less than other estimates, which range from 30,000 to 300,000 (Teltschik, 2006, p. 3; UNICEF, 2010, p. 177). Based on a population of 8,300,000 under 18 years in 2008 (UNICEF, 2012b), between 0.04% and 3.61% of Ukrainian children could be considered street children, depending on the chosen definition and estimated figure. Some scholars suggest that statistics not only tend to be incomplete but also unreliable so we must be cautious in determining prevalence (Kerfoot, et al.).

Another challenge in estimating the magnitude of the issue, as evidenced by considerable variability in estimates, is a lack of consensus on what constitutes a 'street child,' and sometimes criteria do not reflect how the children themselves would like to be classified (Panter-Brick, 2002). Recognizing that all street children are not truly homeless, Kerfoot, et al. (2007), used three categories similar to those described by Le Roux (1996) to classify Ukrainian children based on residential status: 'disconnected' (i.e., orphaned, abandoned, or refugees living on the street), 'partially connected' (i.e., voluntarily homeless, choosing to live on the streets while visiting family infrequently), and 'connected' (i.e., living at home but out on the streets daily with street children). In Kerfoot, et al.'s (2007, p. 35) southeast Kyiv sample of 86 children, 26.7% were disconnected, 39.5% were partially connected, and 33.7% were connected.

Furthermore, in a large sample of 805 street children across four major cities, 33.4% were double orphans, 43.7% were single orphans, and 22.9% were not orphans (Busza, et al., 2011). These findings suggest that across multiple samples, not all street children are genuinely homeless; nevertheless, all street children, regardless of residential status, are at risk for numerous negative outcomes and are influenced by many of the same contributing factors.

Contributing factors

As the existence of street children in Ukraine is a multidimensional phenomenon, it is important to cover some key contributing factors. Some key contributors include economic, political, and cultural aspects. An understanding of these factors is important in formulating good policy.

Economic

Extreme poverty is a root cause of all factors that lead to street life (Dybicz, 2005; Le Roux & Smith, 1998). Ukraine is currently classified as a lower middle-income nation with a gross national income (GNI) per capita—a measure of average income per citizen—of \$989 (constant 2000 U.S. dollars), which has never surpassed the 1991 indicator of \$1160. Comparatively, the world average in 1990 was \$4658 and reached \$5996 in 2010 (World Bank, 2012). Ukraine's transition to a new market economy has been associated with some parents working longer hours, while children are left unattended (Pavlik, 2004). In general, high unemployment tends to accompany economic declines (Le Roux & Smith, 1998) and in Ukraine some families live apart as one parent might seek work in other countries—sometimes for years at a time. Since street children tend to come from single-parent homes, and these arrangements are not always as lucrative as expected, this circumstance puts children at-risk for ending up on the street.

Political

Another significant contributor is the ongoing transition from an outdated child welfare system. An institution-focused system has prevailed and remains a key component of child welfare, despite legislative efforts in 2006 to shift the focus to family-based, kinship, and foster-based care (Holt International, 2010). Some street children run away from these institutions to live on the street (UNICEF, 2010, p. 182). While reasons for doing so vary, institutions often do not meet adequate living conditions, such as clothes and food. Some children experience violence from staff. Being raised in a low-quality institution is associated with alcohol/drug use and criminal involvement after discharge (UNICEF, p. 182). Approximately one-third to one-half of street children have, at some point, been institutionalized in state run facilities (Busza, et al., 2011; Kerfoot, et al., 2007; Zapata, et al., 2011). It is important to note that the negative influence of institutionalization can be even greater when coupled with a poor post-institution environment (Maclean, 2003). Institutionalizing street children might be of little help to them in the long-term, particularly if they return back to the street. However, institutionalization can provide a stable shelter that protects children from a number of alternative health-related and psychological challenges, if allotted adequate funds and consisting of caring staff.

A key link between institutions and street children is the established law enforcement policy toward street children. Some administrators, who are part of the Criminal Police for Minors and other governmental agencies, openly communicate negative attitudes toward street children. This attitude of children as “potential criminals” sometimes is reflected in police behavior, which can include physical or sexual violence. Also, street raids have led children to find better hideouts, making it more difficult for workers to find them and provide services (Teltschik, Balakireva, Sereda, Bondar, & Sakovych, 2008, p. 112). A number of studies inquire about this issue. In one sample, approximately 75% of participants reported being harassed by

police, sometimes meaning violence, with boys having a greater likelihood than girls; and 41% had been harassed more than three times in the past year (Busza, et al. 2011). Furthermore, arrests and detentions reinforce the avoidance of police, since adolescents can be detained for up to two years before and during trial (Teltschik, et al. 2008, p. 113).

Cultural

A number of interrelated cultural and family risk factors are found in Ukraine related to the street children phenomenon. Some of these include alcoholism and substance abuse, physical/sexual abuse, and neglect. Some street children might be led to the street in order to avoid family conflict or even to assert their own independence. In an eastern Ukrainian sample, children tended to enter street life for individual reasons (i.e., difficult family circumstance) and seemed to stay for collectivist reasons, as they became part of that particular subculture of street youth (Naterer & Godina, 2011). Certain family structures are particularly at risk, such as mother-headed single-parent families and parents who are separated or divorced (Le Roux & Smith, 1998; Zapata, et al., 2011). In Ukraine, street children tend to be deprived of sufficient and/or regular contact with their parents, which may contribute to the general distrust for adults reported among them (Pavlik, 2004). In a recent study by Zapata et al., a number of questions were asked regarding the participants' family of origin before age 15. Approximately two-thirds reported living with an alcoholic or illicit drug user, 38% with someone who was mentally ill or attempted suicide, 41% lived with someone who went to prison, 60% had parents who were divorced or separated, 54% witnessed intimate partner violence, and half had experienced some type of abuse themselves. Only 10% of their sample had not experienced any of these adverse childhood experiences (end paraphrase). These results suggest that street youth tend to come from at-risk families who struggle with intra- and interpersonal issues and behaviors.

Impact

Street children are exposed to a number of negative experiences and risk factors while on the street. Some of these include malnutrition, violence, police harassment and abuse, drug abuse, risky sexual activity, sexual abuse, forced sex, and HIV infection (Arrington & Yorgin, 2001; Busza, et al., 2011). Opportunities to make money are few so children sometimes resort to begging, stealing, or prostitution (Naterer & Godina, 2011; UNICEF, 2010, p. 178). Many are not enrolled in school and thus fall behind in their educational attainment (Busza, et al.; Kerfoot, et al., 2007; UNICEF, p. 177). Another crucial impact is pregnancy. In a large sample of street youth, approximately 42% of females and 24% of males were involved in a pregnancy—most of which were unintended with nearly half ending in abortion (Zapata, et al., 2011). The infants that are born result in an intergenerational effect, as the infant also becomes a street child. From an emotional and psychological standpoint, these risk factors contribute to feelings of isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and traumatization (Arrington & Yorgin, 2001).

A major health risk being studied frequently is HIV among Ukrainian street youth (Busza, et al., 2011; Goodwin, Kozlova, Nizharadze, & Polyakova, 2004; Robbins, et al., 2010; Teltschik, 2006; Zapata, et al., 2011). In 2007, the adult population (age 15-49) with HIV was estimated at 1.63% (Kruglov, et al., 2008), and street children engaging in certain identified behaviors are at high-risk of infection. Many street-based adolescents found in Kyiv, Donetsk, Dnepropetrovsk, and Nikolaev were found to be at-risk for HIV—15.5% reported injected drug use at least once, 9.8% of boys reported having had anal sex, and only 36% acknowledged having used a condom at their most recent sexual encounter (Busza, et al., 2011). Additionally, only 22.3% of the sample had at least one HIV test, and only 12.3% of the sample had undergone a test within the past year with knowledge of the test results (Busza, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, many children who use drugs report sharing needles (Robbins, et al., 2010). A national study in

Ukraine by Shevchenko et al., whose findings were presented in 2009, focused on 15- to 24-year-olds living or working on the street and revealed an 18.4% HIV infection rate, reiterating the risk street children face while they are young and later in adulthood (as cited in Busza, et al., 2011). Researchers have also found that some children lack knowledge about HIV prevention measures such as condom use (Robbins, et al., 2010). With these numerous negative impacts in mind, there are measures that are being taken to help these children at-risk.

Current Efforts

Specific strategies include legislation, prevention, and rehabilitation, which are made by a spectrum of organizations including government, international, and non-governmental bodies.

Government

During the Soviet Union, the communist party established a policy to remove children from dysfunctional families and the streets to keep them in orphanages and this policy is still in effect (Pavlik, 2004). The Ukrainian government continues to have a limited level of service for street children in state-run orphanages and boarding schools, where children reside until age 18. These institutions provide basic services with few resources (Kerfoot, et al., 2007). Importantly, in 2005, the government officially announced its goal to shift its focus from institutional to family-based care, and in 2006 new legislation fostered the promotion of domestic adoption, kinship care and foster care; however, in 2010, the number of children deprived of parental care remained close to 100,000 (Holt International, 2010). This change in policy is in line with the rights of children declared in the CRC, which Ukraine ratified in 1991 (UNICEF, 2012). In 2006, the law on the Basis of Social Protection of Homeless Citizens and Children further defined the principles for a system of social protection of homeless children, outlining methods of prevention and reintegration into society to act as a framework for stakeholders and policy implementers (Law of Ukraine, 2006).

Importantly, the Criminal Police for Minors, which play a key role in identifying and linking children to services, are striving to improve by the means of additional police training in restorative justice and community policing, and are also visiting schools and cooperating more readily with civil society organizations (Teltschik, et al., 2008, p. 113).

Bi-lateral & Multi-lateral International Efforts

As a bilateral effort, the United States, through USAID, has helped finance street children outreach efforts for HIV prevention, medical service, and recruitment for drop-in-centers (USAID, 2011). In the early 1990s after the CRC, the United Nations, as a multilateral effort, adopted resolutions which invited governments and non-governmental organizations "...to cooperate with each other to ensure greater awareness and more effective action to solve the problem of street children by, among other measures, initiating and supporting development projects that can have a positive impact on the situation of street children" (UN Resolution on the Plight of Street Children, 1994, p. 3). With this direction, the United Nations has worked through UNICEF, which opened its office in Kyiv in 1997 and has programs being implemented in over a dozen major cities. UNICEF reports that it has assisted in the research of street children in order to raise awareness and establish an understanding of the extent of the problem. It also has worked with the Ukrainian government to improve the child welfare system and implement effective social policy (UNICEF, 2012).

Civil Society & Cross-National NGOs

The number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Ukraine is growing and play a key role in providing services to street children. These organizations, some of which are faith-based, sometimes provide flexible day-care and short-term accommodation for periods up to a year. These organizations depend largely on grants and fund-raising, with subsidization from the state often including free accommodation and utilities. The standard of care in these settings

tends to be higher than state services, but fluctuates due to funding (Kerfoot, et al., 2007). Some NGOs perform medical and outreach services, which can include harm-reduction and prevention efforts such as condom distribution. Some strengths of NGOs include being able to operate outside the conventional bureaucratic system, and being able to easily establish partner and donor relationships; and weaknesses include high staff turnover, and sometimes operating without the presence of a clear legal framework to regulate services (Teltschik, et al., 2008, p. 43). At the beginning of 2009 there were approximately 70 of these facilities performing a variety of roles for the benefit of street children. Unfortunately, they are disproportionately distributed more densely in Odessa and Donetsk oblasts (i.e., regions) as opposed to other oblasts, such as Kyiv and Ivano Frankivsk (UNICEF, 2010, p. 181). These organizations play a key role in providing services to street children, and are primarily found in urban areas.

Recommendations for Future Policy and Action

An examination of the background, prevalence, contributing factors, impact, and current efforts has shown that the street children phenomenon is significant and needs further attention. This knowledge has provided a framework around which to make recommendations for future policy decisions and action. The key recommendations include ensuring human rights, shifting from institution-based care, organizing child-centered rehabilitation programs, and conducting more program evaluations.

Ensure the currently established human rights for street children

Notwithstanding the basic rights outlined in Ukrainian policy, these rights are not being actualized in all instances. Street children tend to be distrustful of authority figures, particularly the police force which has a primary legal responsibility to identify and link children to services (Busza, et al., 2011). With many street children reporting harassment and abuse from police, it is important that this enmity be significantly reduced. The Criminal Police For Minors has already

taken some measures to make improvements, such as additional officer training in working with street children (Teltschik, et al., 2008, p. 113), but the problem remains in the eyes of children. The police remain a key stumbling block in the system to ensure human rights, and until children can trust them it will remain difficult to find and help street children. Perhaps it is difficult to assess the extent to which police harassment actually takes place among street children, but to whatever extent it does take place police should be held accountable for poor behavior and should accept the concept of street children as ‘victims’ rather than ‘potential criminals.’ Additional improvements can be made by holding officers accountable for abusive behavior, and adopting a ‘victim’ conceptualization. This adjustment in policy will strengthen the weak link between children and the pivotal areas of education, health care, HIV prevention, family reunification, and recruitment for rehabilitative programs.

Continue the shift from institution-based care

As a priority, the emphasis should be given to family-based and kinship care. Families should be assisted through additional preventative policy measures. Even families with poorer-than-average parenting skills have better cognitive and physical outcomes for their children than institutionalized children (Dobrova-Krol, Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Juffer, 2010), and providing assistance to families tends to be much cheaper than the institutionalization of children. It is important to continue to expand the foster care system. For children without families, increasing domestic adoption rates can reduce dependency on institutions and foster care. Disconnected street children might be more willing to trust authorities if their likelihood of institutionalization was not permanent, or perhaps not a possibility. Since the majority of domestic adoptions are by couples that report infertility, fertility clinics and physicians should be targeted for the recruitment of adoptive families (Groza, Komarova, Galchinskaya, Gerasimova, & Volynets, 2010). Furthermore, this is more cost-effective than general campaigns to promote

adoption, which have been implemented in recent years. There is also a need for pre-adoption training and post-adoption services for adoptive parents to improve the process (Holt International, 2010).

Organize rehabilitation programs with an emphasis on allowing children to be children

Creating a safe environment for the child to process their trauma through various child-appropriate means such as art therapy can help accomplish this (Arrington & Yorgin, 2001). Children are resilient, but we must work at their developmental level, which may have gaps that need to be overcome. Street life can throw children into a more adult-like or survival state-of-mind and allowing treatment to be child-centered has important benefits for psychological healing and rehabilitation.

Conduct more research on the efficacy of interventions

As most interventions are based on theory derived from basic descriptive research, organizations providing services should further develop their programs by performing program evaluations to establish best practice, which may result in more political and financial support for services (Dybicz, 2005). There are some things that are known, currently. For example, interventions should target the child, not the group, and family reunification or fostering should take place as early as possible to increase the likelihood of better outcomes (Conticini, 2008). Evaluated programs in the United States that target HIV are most successful at recruiting and retaining youth when they are present/future-oriented, as opposed to assigning blame or focusing on the past, and use skill-based interventions that focus on reducing behaviors that put street youth at-risk for HIV (Arnold & Rotheram-Borus, 2009). Identifying universally known interventions that are effective, and not effective, will assist administrators in establishing best practice for Ukrainian street children across desired outcomes.

As Ukraine undergoes the process of market transition and globalization, it is important to remember street children who live on the margins of society. Though there are a number of obstacles to overcome, Ukraine and the global community can continue to work together to ensure the human rights of street children. Despite street children being a worldwide phenomenon, lessons can be learned and progress can be made to improve the well-being of street children in Ukraine and our own sense of humanity as a global community.

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