

## **Addiction Among Street Children in Sealdah Station and Related Issues**

**Sibnath Sarkar\* and Sukla Basu\*\***

**Abstract :** *On the streets, station's platforms, bus stand and other busy areas of Kolkata city, we can see a large number of vagabond children playing, begging, sleeping, or doing some work alone or in a group. They are with or without their parents. Many of them are ill and weak and most of them are exposed to serious forms of exploitation. They have little or no ability to change their lives. These children are called the street children. These children have to face tremendous psychological pressure and stress. Social neglect, lack of parental care, and an acute identity crisis, coupled with all sorts of exploitation beginning from economic to bitter sexual harassment (particularly of girls) drive these poor souls to different types of criminal activities and habit of addiction. They are all mostly drug abusers or substance abusers. The children are both peddlers and consumers. These habits are very much hazardous for their health, because they fail to come out of this cruel circle both for economic reasons and for their own physical dependence on drugs. This paper aims to explore the different psychological pressures that drive them to drug abuse and try to propose some remedies for fruitful development of these children. This paper highlights upon the data gathered from the study of 253 street children in Sealdah Station Area, Kolkata.*

**Keywords :** *street children, harsh environment, addiction, health hazards*

### **Introduction**

The issue of street children is considered an urban problem. We can find some vagabond children on the railway station complex, near the temples, in markets, under the bridges, near the bus stand etc. in all cities and Kolkata is no exception. Many of them are ill, all are helpless, and most are exposed to serious forms of exploitation. They have little or no ability to come out of the situation. Street children are those who have abandoned their homes, school, and immediate communities before they are sixteen years of age, and have drifted into a nomadic street life.

The problem of street children is one of the burning social disturbances in many developing and developed countries. The UNICEF (2012) cites the incidence of a street population as an outcome of the inability of urban planning to accommodate the rapid inflow of people into a city. They constitute a marginalized population in most urban centres of the world; poverty being the main cause for their migration from home (Bratter and Forrest 1985). Among the developing countries of the world, India is home to the world's largest population of street children, estimated

---

\* Assistant Professor of Geography at Nahata J. N. M. S Mahavidyalaya, e-mail : sibnathsarkar@gmail.com

\*\* Associate Professor of Geography, WBSU, e-mail : dr.basusukla@gmail.com



million. It has 7 percent street children of the total child population (UNESCO Report India, the phenomenon of street children is an outcome of complex interplay of various factors. Rapid urbanization, migration, high rate of unemployment and increasing poverty results in increasing number of children on the streets. Like other metropolitan cities, Kolkata is also facing the difficulties related to street children. The street children are often compelled to negotiate their existence in the world of crime, misery, abuse and exploitation that takes them to the world of addiction and/ drug abuse. Studies of Child line India Foundation reveals that societal abuses are recognized in various forms by the Indian legal system.

### Significance of the Study

The review of literature reveals that very little study has been done on the street children in Kolkata in spite of their visible presence on the streets or on the railway platforms. So the present study has been done on one of the most conspicuous crowded areas of the metropolis: the rail junction of Sealdah. This study has identified the severity of the problem among the street children in the study area highlighting the causes and consequence of this plight. Some remedial measures to get rid of this social curse have also been suggested which can be included in government policy. The study intends to create awareness among the public, as it is not the problem of street children only but that of the entire society: the children being the future citizens of our country on whom our development depends.

### Objectives

The main objectives of the study is to find out the following—

- To identify the reasons behind the children being on the street;
- To investigate the psychological stress and strain faced by the street children in their daily life.
- To analyze the nature of addiction and substance use and their consequent health status;
- In addition, to suggest a few policy guidelines for the development of these children.

### Methodology and Data

Geographic qualitative methods, or ethnographical research techniques, are used by human geographers. Qualitative research has relatively few standardised procedures for evaluation, the practitioners are encouraged to be flexible and to utilise novel methodological and analytical procedures (Baxter and Eyles 1997). Consequently multiple qualitative methods were administered on the street children, the target population under scrutiny. Cross-Sectional Surveys are used to gather information on a population at a single point in time. In this case the target population was the street children found on the Sealdah railway station premises ; (both north and south section) within ward 28, 35 and 36 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation .Due to their mobile nature, snowball-sampling method has been applied. Through structured and unstructured interviews, narrative analysis and participant observation the primary data was obtained and then consequently analyzed. This was done after prolonged engagement with the respondents involving spending sufficient



time in the field to build trust and rapport and to learn the 'culture' of the relevant group. It was only then that a sample of 253 street children aged between 6 to 18 years was covered for the study. A pilot study was conducted before finalizing the techniques to be adopted in collecting the field data. This kind of study has little of secondary data and so the analysis is based solely on the primary data which was collected in phases during the period of research work.

### Findings and Discussion

From field observation and other previous literature survey, street children can be divided into the following classes:

1. Children belonging to the families who have migrated permanently;
2. Children belonging to the families who have migrated temporarily and would go back to their homes after some time;
3. Children alone or with family coming from suburbs and adjoining villages of the city in the morning, doing some unorganized, marginalized work during the day and going back in the evening;
4. Children of very poor families lacking care and protection;
5. Child workers or labourers;
6. Unattached children who include orphans, abandoned children, maladjusted children, delinquent children, run-away children and children having conflict with law etc. The study has analysed the related issues of children falling under this category.

Demographic characteristics of respondents are very much essential in this study as they contribute to an understating of social and economic problems that cause children to be on the street. The primary sample survey reveals that the boys (226) outnumber the girls (27) forming more than 89.33 percent of the street children.

**Table-1: Age-Sex Composition of Abandoned Street Children**

Age group	Boys	(In percentage)	Girls	(In percentage)
6 to 9	38	( 16.81)	03	(11.11)
9 to 12	72	( 31.86)	06	(22.23)
12 to 15	94	(41.59)	08	(29.63)
15 to 18	22	(9.74)	10	(37.03)
	<b>226</b>	<b>(100.00)</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>(100.00)</b>

*Source: Primary Survey*

The literature studied reveals that the predominant age group of the street children across the world is between this particular age group of 10-16. From the field study the researcher found out



NO.2

that boys belonging to the age group of 9-15 years are the most dominant (73.85 percent) in the study area; followed by the 6-9 years age group (16.81 percent) while the age group of 15-18 forms about one-tenth (9.74 percent) of the identified children. The mean age of the 226 boys surveyed is thus 12.34 years. The girls surveyed are mainly in the age group of 12 to 18 years comprising of two-thirds (66.67 percent) of the total girls.

### Factors Leading to the Existence of Street Children

UNESCO (1997) deciphered the phenomenon of street children by identifying certain causes, which include rapid and uncontrolled urban population explosion, family disintegration, unemployment, inadequacy of educational and social systems, maladjustment of formal educational systems leading to school failure, dropout or rejection, insufficiency or lack of institutions to take care of children who have dropped out of school etc. Often the combination of several phenomena gives rise to the problems of street children. The child on the street is the end product of a chain of events beginning at the home (Mc Loyd, V.C 1998). Ghosh (1992) had mentioned that divorce of parents, death of one parent or both, separation from the parents, and broken family relations have a direct impact on children's socialization. Even since the day of industrial revolution in Europe, the children have been found working, living, or loitering around in streets, cross roads, public parks, market places, and railway stations etc. Apparently, the root cause behind the occurrence of the problem of street children is linked with poverty. However if we clearly look at the phenomenon, it goes beyond poverty. While on the one hand they are in the realm of poverty, sickness, and exploitation, on the other hand, they bear all these despite being innocent, lonely, and frightened young children. In India, the phenomenon of street children is an offshoot of complex interplay of various factors; the occurrence of street children seemed to have acquired a gigantic dimension in the wake of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The corresponding scenario in Kolkata's busy rail station area of Sealdah is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Causes of Migration from Home life to Street life

Causes of Migration	Number of street children	Percentage
Poverty	94	37.15
Family disharmony	48	18.97
Family violence and abuse	30	11.86
Negligence	21	8.30
Search of independence	23	9.09
Attraction of city life	18	7.13
Don't Know/ other causes	19	7.50

Source: Primary Survey



The sample survey reveals that poverty, domestic or family related problems, and the case of children whose parents either remarried/divorced/eloped or were addicted to alcohol, were crucial factors leading to children being on the railway platform premises. Personal freedom, the need for monetary independence, and the lure of the city were some other reasons for moving out of the home.

The destination of the street children is the Sealdah station area, but the place of residence/origin has a varied spatial extent as shown in Table 3. This is due to the connectivity of this rail junction with rest of the country as well as with Bangladesh.

**Table 3: Source of Migration**

Area/ location	No of children	Percentage of street children
Kolkata city Area	56	22.13
Kolkata Suburban	40	15.81
Other Districts	101	39.92
Other States	41	16.21
International	15	5.93

*Source: Primary Survey*

A group that is at risk of ending up on the street is the migrant children. It is evident that there is almost same proportion of migration from other districts of West Bengal and from urban areas of Kolkata (including its suburbs). About one-tenth of the slum population in India is from West Bengal and Kolkata being the state capital with a high urban pull, accounts for a large share of this population characterized by small congested dwellings with limited infrastructure and with a large section of children many of whom run away or are on the streets. Almost one-fifth (16 percent) of the children have come from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha by rail route, a very few from across the border via again the rail route and sheltered themselves in Sealdah area.

### **Living Condition of the Children**

Most of the children are under very poor conditions of living. The main characteristics of these children are that they live alone in streets and without proper or reliable shelter (Lugala and Mbwanbo, 1999). They prefer the rail station area of Sealdah for living because of ready availability of sources of water, shade, and different working opportunities. Street children are required to fend for themselves every moment of time. Research has shown that there are surprising similarities between the working activities carried out by street children all over the world, whether the economy is agriculturally or industrially based (Black, M.1993). From our survey, it is learnt that most of the children are engaged in different types of marginalized and unorganized activities to survive in their daily life. In this area, children are very much involved in waste material collection, shoe shining, loading and unloading, begging, work at the vegetable market and other activities (Table 4); rag



picking being the most dominant and the most vulnerable one. The children usually live in a harsh living environment with no scheduled time of bathing or eating. Children do not brush their teeth, cut their hair or nails, and wash their clothes regularly; this unhygienic condition adding to their susceptibility to several diseases.

Table 4: Economic Activities of the Street Children

Activities	Number of children	Percentage of children
Waste material collection	112	44.27
Shoe shining	09	3.56
Loading and unloading	18	7.11
Begging	32	12.65
Work at vegetable market	23	9.09
Other activities	59	23.32

Source: Based on Primary Survey

### Psychological Stress and Strain Faced

Most of the street children in India use positive coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of their lives. However there are some who have no other choice but to adopt maladaptive strategies such as using drugs. The report based on a study undertaken by Kombarakaran (2004) in Mumbai's street children revealed frustration concerning living on the street or conflicts in their family forcing them to leave home and then taking to drugs. Several studies reveal that most children who leave home to live on the streets come from slums or low cost housing, both of which are areas of high illiteracy, drug use, and unemployment. So some of this vulnerable section already used to such practices spread it among other fellow companions.

The stress and pressure of street children as revealed from the respondent survey are cited below:

- Major life events had occurred in their lives without them having any control over the situation. This unavoidable shattering effect requires variable periods of adjustment. Drug use is often an attempt to fight with the stress in the period of adjustment.
- Children also face the everyday problems on the street life, which are also very hard to cope with, such as finding accommodation, food and clothes; protection/escape from violence and sexual abuse by police and other people. The use of drugs helps them to forget everything for a while.
- Street children always adapt to new situations, new group of street children, while they move between communities and cities. Drugs help them to make easier acceptance between the new companion and place.



- Some children are compelled to take the drugs because they fail to come out of this vicious circle for both economic reasons and their own physical dependence on drugs.
- Lack of parental care, emotional bonding, and guidance of the adults make them frustrated and indulge them in the world of addiction.

The reasons behind addiction as revealed from the response of the respondents are given in Table 5(A). It is learnt that they become addicted to find relief/escape from their day-to-day problems. The substances used by the children to combat various situations is shown in table 5(B).

**Table 5(A): Causes of Addiction by Street Children**

Daily problems faced by street children	Use of substances to combat the problems
Starvation	Reduce the pain of hunger
Anxiety in life	Helps to gather courage
Sleeplessness	Help to generate drowsiness
Communication with a newer group	Medium of communication
Tiredness	Supply energy to work
Lack of emotional care	Help to forget
Physical pain or injury	To habituate with the pain
Lack of entertainment or dull life	Add some excitement

*Source: Primary observation and interaction by the researchers*

**Table 5(B) : Substances Used by the Surveyed Street Children**

Substances generally used by the children	Number of Children		Percentages	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Inhalant (Glue mainly Dendrite)	112	5	44.27	15.63
Tobacco (smoking)	41	0	16.21	00.00
Tobacco (chewing)	59	4	23.32	12.50
Guthka (type of Pan Masala)	52	7	20.55	21.87
Alcohol	22	0	8.70	00.00
Not responded/replied	83	16	32.81	50.00
<b>Total no children*</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>32</b>		

*Source: Primary survey*



\*Many children use more than one substance and hence the total number of children specified here is greater than the actual figures cited in table 1. The percentage figures are that for the actual figures for boys and girls cited in table 1.

### Addictive Substances and its Consequences

According to the survey of UNICEF (2005), the street children are getting addicted to different substances due to the environment and family related problems. Children generally inhale in a group and this can be termed as a group activity or social event among the street children. During the survey, a large number of respondents said they indulge in addiction mainly because of group influence or peer pressure. Most of the street children (85 percent) of this study area use glue, as main sources of addiction. They mainly use dendrite because it is easily available, cheap, and easy to use. A significant number of shops selling dendrite was seen in the outskirts of the station complex. Substance can be inhaled through the mouth or nose with the help of plastic bag or pieces of cloth. The most popular technique used to inhale glue (mainly dendrite) is by dropping it into a thin polythene bag or a piece of cloth and inhaling continuously. The harmful effects of glue sniffing are found to be related to the brain and nervous system. According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) Research Report, (2012) chronic abuse of volatile solvent such as "Toluene" (which is found in dendrite) may damage the brain and nervous system and long time use of this glue can produce significant damage to heart, lungs, liver and kidney. Hence, it is very much essential to redress this addiction problem through awareness generation and counselling.

### Conclusion and Remedial Measures

The agencies looking into the problems of the vulnerable invisible children at the international level are the UNICEF (the agency dedicated to helping the world realize the rights of children); the WHO, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR); the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), etc. The Child Helpline International (CHI) is a global network of child help lines working on the issue of child protection. Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) is an international body that supports the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. India signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. (Child Helpline International, 2012)

The problem of street children is well known everywhere both in developed and developing countries. Due to lack of permanent shelter and the fact that the number of street children is not recorded in any national survey or study, street children are often called the 'hidden children'. Being hidden, they are at a higher risk to being abused, exploited, and neglected. It is very clear from our study that a hostile environment force them to start using drugs. From the primary level survey, it is revealed that nearly 70 percent of the children have migrated from their home because of poverty and family disharmony. If we see the statistics of their nature of migration, we can find out that more than 40 percent of the street children have migrated from the different districts of the state. Nearly 30 percent children are from Kolkata and its suburban areas. However, most of the street children want to leave the street life if they are provided proper opportunities for betterment of their future they said.



This social crisis needs to be addressed by all concerned; with much emphasis at the national and local level. Government organizations and NGOs should take indispensable steps for their improvement. In order to provide services to this vulnerable group of children the Government of India began the Integrated Programme for Street Children. However, it needs to be pulled up, as one of the recommendations of the UNCRC Report in 2001 given to India was to strengthen and extend this Programme.

The observation and evidence suggests that the problem of glue sniffing and other inhalants is not only the problem among them, but also increasingly found among the school and college students. Therefore, this problem needs to be checked urgently before it spreads everywhere.

The street children are indeed a special group of children needing special protection on account of their vulnerability. Some remedial measures, which can be taken to cope with this severe problem, are —

- They should be provided with different vocational trainings that will help them to establish themselves in future.
- The shop-keepers should be made aware about the ill effect of glue on children.
- Social concern and awareness rising is needed to fight the problems.
- Health clinics should be established that could provide counseling and acute medical care.
- The Government of India through decentralized planning should fully commit towards the meeting of Millennium Development Goal 1, which aims in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger - the root cause behind the phenomenon of street children. (Child line India Foundation, 2014)
- Last but not the least strict government measure of banning the sale of glue and other adhesive material to children is the need of the hour.
- Finally, the problem in India is that there is no substance abuse policy and so this should be framed and implemented

## References

- Baxter Jamie and Eyles John (1997) :Evaluating Qualitative Research in Social Geography: Establishing 'Rigour' in Interview Analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22 pp505-525
- Black, M. (1993): Street and Working Children, Edited by Innocenti Global Seminar Report. Florence, Italy: United Nations Children's Fund. pp 15-17.
- Bratter T. E and Forrest G. G (1985): Alcoholism and Substance Abuse: Strategies for Clinical Intervention , New York: The Free Press. pp. 508-522
- Ghosh, A. (1992): Street Children of Calcutta: A Situational Analysis, National Labour Institute. p. 14
- Kombarakaran, Francis A (2004): Street Children of Bombay: Their Stress and Strategies of Coping. *Children and Youth Services Review* 26: pp 853-871



- Lugalla, J. and Mbwambo, J. (1999) Street Children and Street Life in Urban Tanzania: The Culture of Surviving and its Implications, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 23:pp 329-345.
- McLoyd, V.C (1998): Socio Economic Disadvantage and Child Development. *American Psychologist*, pp 185-204.
- NIDA, National Institute of Drug Abuse; United States of America, Research Report: Inhalants, Published May 1999, Revised July 2012. pp 5-6.
- UNCRC (2001): United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, [10 December 2001]. pp 4-5.
- UNICEF (2005): The State of World's Children: Excluded and Invisible, New York. pp 15-20.
- UNESCO (1997): *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A Transdisciplinary Vision for Concerted Action*. Paragraph- 89.
- UNESCO (2003): Street Children, Drugs, and HIV/AIDS: The Response of Preventive Education. Paris. pp 23-24.

#### Online references:

- Child line India Foundation (2014) <http://www.childlineindia.org.in>
- Child Helpline International (2012) <http://www.childhelplineinternational.org>
- Street children in India From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street\\_children\\_in\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_children_in_India) on 19-7-2015
- UNICEF (2012) State of the World's Children (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc>)
- UNICEF Mapping India's Children <http://www.dgreet.com/mappingindia/index.htm>