

STAYING PREFERENCES BY STREET CHILDREN IN SURAT CITY

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ABSTRACT

India houses the largest number of street children in the world. These children often live in abject poverty and squalid conditions. The present study aims to explore their staying preferences in the city of Surat and the reasons thereof. This cross-sectional study was conducted by interviewing 326 street children in Surat city.

The study found that street children prefer to stay and work in Surat city as they perceive that Surat is a safer city; it is easier to earn money in this city; life and assimilation also is easier; there is less harassment by older children, police and others. The maximum numbers of street children are staying on the railway platforms 115 (35.3%). The major reasons given by the street children for choosing their place of stay are safety, convenience of finding work, comfortable shelter characteristics, availability of friends, and less harassment.

There is a need to build mechanisms to increase safety of the street children at their places of stay and check their abuse by older children, police and authorities and encourage their stay at day care (24 hour care) centres.

Key words: Street Children, shelter, safety, harassment, Surat

INTRODUCTION

India houses the largest number of street children¹⁻² in the world. For the purpose of this study street children have been taken as 'children off the street' or the street based 'children who spend most days and nights on the street' and are functionally without family support.² They constitute a highly vulnerable, most deprived and marginalized section of the society, whose rights are constantly violated with impunity.³ Their life is devoid of the love, affection and care which are a fundamental right of every child and which enable a child to become a responsible citizen of tomorrow. Poverty and illiteracy are the 'Tombstone' of this tale of misery.

These children escape from their home when 10 to 12 years old to neighbouring cities with the

hope of finding a more tolerable life and get caught in another world of exploitation, hunger, violence and abuse and are forced to live in abject poverty. They work in the unorganised sector for long hours for a pittance and their presence is unfelt by our labour welfare laws. They are oft illiterate or primary school dropouts from extremely poor and marginalized families and have faced explicit physical, mental, emotional or sexual abuse at home and consequently suffer from various mental disorders in later life. Addictions and substance use are an invariable part of their milieu.

These children often live in abject poverty and squalid conditions⁴ and sleep in places like railway platforms of railway station; residing area close to railway station like footpaths; railway tracks; slums attached to railway tracks;

garnalas; unused buildings; bus depot; under the flyover bridges; and near gardens. The present study aims to explore their staying preferences in the city of Surat and the reasons thereof.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a cross-sectional study which was conducted in Surat city. 326 street children were interviewed using a pretested interview schedule prepared with the inputs of the street children and key stake holders to garner information on study variables. The period of information collected was spread over 21 month period commencing from January 2007 upto September 2008. These questions were simple and largely close ended. The interview language was largely Hindi as the street children are comfortable with the usage of this language. The information thus collected was entered on a excel spreadsheet and was analysed with the help of SPSS software. Appropriate statistical tests for significance, often percentages and means have been applied. Considering the theoretical and policy significance of the theme, the study adopts both the quantitative and qualitative approach.

The concentration points of street children in Surat city are the railway platforms; areas near and around the railway station like foot-paths, railway tracks, slums, garnalas, bus depots, signal lights, parks, and, gardens and therefore these were the key areas for data collection. Street children were contacted either at their work place or where they were residing and 5 to 20 repeat visits were necessary for gaining their confidence before they came out with truthful answers on sexual history. These children gave their informed consent only on the assurance of firm and irrevocable confidentiality and even then their identities have been concealed from the investigators, to the extent feasible and not recorded on the response forms. All of the children were provided with treatments free of cost on the spot by the investigators, through medical camps and at hospitals affiliated to Medical Colleges and at the Municipal Urban Health Centres for their health complaints. The study has received ethical clearance from the ethical committee of the Surat Municipal Institute of Medical Education and Research and no conflicts of interest have been declared.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Street children prefer to stay and work in Surat city as they perceive that Surat is a safer city; it is easier to earn money in this city; life and assimilation also is easier; there is less harassment by older children, police and others; communication in Hindi is possible; and, other street children from the same state or the same area as that of the freshly arrived child help these fresher. The present staying patterns are as given in table 1.

Table 1: Present staying pattern of the street children

Present staying pattern of the street children	Number (%)
Railway platform	115 (35.3)
Footpath near railway station	100 (30.7)
Slums surrounding railway station	39 (12.0)
Day care center	27 (8.3)
Rented room in a slum at some distance from railway station	18 (5.5)
Unoccupied building anywhere	08 (2.5)
Restaurant in which they work	04 (1.2)
Below flyovers and bridges	05 (1.5)
Near parks and gardens	04 (1.2)
Hotel in which they work	03 (0.9)
Below garnala (railway bridge)	03 (0.9)
Total	326 (100)

The table reveals that the maximum numbers of street children are staying on the railway platforms 115 (35.3%). The major reasons given by the street children for choosing their place of stay are safety, convenience of finding work, comfortable shelter characteristics, availability of friends, and less harassment. In nearly all of the instances when the children come into the streets they come to the railway station and catch a train and get down at some place and keep on roaming for 7 to 10 days. During this period they often decide on a city to stay and work and railway platforms are their first place to stay. These children only stay in cities where the railway platforms are crowded and busy even late into the night, so that their presence cannot be detected and they feel safe. Once they get down at a railway platform they observe whether other street children are already there and their behaviour; their activities; and, any harassment by police and railway staff.

Sometimes, another street child or a coolie discovers that a new street child has come and

offers guidance or help and thus they gain entry into that area. In case such children are noticed by the children residing in day care centers then these children take the new child to their centre where they can remain safely for some time, till they feel that they have assimilated into the city and feel comfortable to venture into other stay areas. Sometimes, even the railway authorities inform the authorities of the day care centers when they come to know about a new child and a person from the day care centre visits the new child and offers help. Presently, only the Navsarjan trust is running day care centre in Surat city, which is located near the railway station and unofficially accommodates all children in the night timings as well as the day timings, provided they abstain from alcohol and substance use. Most of the children stay here initially for some time and then move to other areas and stay with other street children where they feel more freedom. In case these children feel unsafe in the initial period, then they move to another city.

Table 2: Reasons given for staying on the railway platforms

Reasons	Number (%)
Safe	72 (41.6)
Convenient for finding work	37 (21.4)
Provides shelter even in rains	41 (23.7)
Many friends	23 (13.3)
Total (Multiple Response)	173 (100)

Table 3: Reasons given for staying on footpath near railway station

Reasons	Number (%)
Enjoyment with friends in groups	39 (32.2)
No police harassment & ticket checker	43 (35.5)
No abuse by older children	18 (14.9)
To enjoy gossip	21 (17.4)
Total (Multiple Response)	121 (100)

Table 4: Reasons for staying in slums near railway station

Reasons	Number (%)
For ease of approach for work	14 (31.1)
This simulates family atmosphere with friends	9 (20.0)
Work distribution is possible when living together	2 (4.4)
Like surrounding area	2 (4.4)
Low rent for house by living in groups	11 (24.5)

Owner protect against bigger children/ police/ authorities	5 (11.2)
Owner helps in times of need and grief	2 (4.4)
Total (Multiple Response)	45 (100)

Table 5: Reasons for staying in the day care center

Reasons	Number (%)
Group has good habits & help each other and addicts are not there	12 (21.3)
Similar occupations so we enjoy each other's company	8 (14.0)
We do not develop bad habits as living atmosphere is regulated	7 (12.3)
Facilities as TV, playing and sleeping are of good quality	9 (15.7)
Safe to reside here	13 (22.7)
Project coordinators (uncle and didi) provide emotional support	8 (14.0)
Total (Multiple Response)	57 (100)

Table 6: Reasons for staying in a rented room (kholi) in a slum at some distance from station

Reasons	No. (%)
No harassment by police & authorities	7 (28)
Safe & convenient	5 (20)
Friends are available	4 (16)
Sharing of household chores & if sick other children help with food & purchase of medicines, etc.	6 (24)
No tensions & harassment as we pay for residential arrangement	3 (12)
Total (Multiple Response)	25 (100)

Table 7: Reasons given for staying in restaurants where the street children work

Reasons	Number (%)
Food and refreshments available free and timely	3 (60)
Free stay is a fringe benefit of working in a restaurant	2 (40)
Total (Multiple Response)	5 (100)

Table 8: Reasons for staying in the hotels where they work

Reasons	Number (%)
Food and refreshments available free and timely	3 (50.0)
Free stay is a fringe benefit of working in a restaurant	2 (33.3)
Comfortable stay in rainy and cold season	1 (16.7)
Total (Multiple Response)	6 (100)

Table 9: Reasons given by the Street Children for staying in unoccupied buildings

Reasons	Number (%)
No harassment by police, bigger children & others	5 (38.4)
Feels good to live and sleep with friends	4 (30.8)
No disturbance during day hours while resting	4 (30.8)
Total (Multiple Response)	13 (100)

Table 10: Reasons given by the street children for staying in parks and gardens

Reasons	Number (%)
Freedom to sleep anywhere	2 (33.3)
Work is easily available	1 (16.7)
Ease of earning money is more near parks	2 (33.3)
Convenient location	1 (16.7)
Total (Multiple Response)	06 (100)

Table 11: Reasons given by the street children for staying below flyovers and bridges

Reasons	Number (%)
No trouble during night timings while sleeping	3 (37.5)
Safe as families also reside there	2 (25.0)
No police harassment	1 (12.5)
Less problems during rainy season	2 (25.0)
Total (Multiple Response)	08 (100)

Table 12: Reasons given by the street children for staying below gernalas

Reasons	Number (%)
Good site for selling of alcohol & substance	2 (40)
Can live and work at the same place	2 (40)
No police harassment in work	1 (20)
Total (Multiple Response)	05 (100)

The major reasons for choosing a place of stay other than railway platform are akin to those for choosing the railway platform in the first place, namely safety, convenience of finding work, comfortable shelter characteristics, availability of friends, and less harassment. It appears that their perceptions, mainly relating to their

freedom in life, police harassment, harassment by railway authorities, dictate their movements into other areas of stay. The street children state that freedom is the central concern which shapes their life.

It is observed that platform development changes shelter characteristics. Till a few years ago railway platform number four was hardly in use by a few trains so nearly all of the street children were staying there. Subsequently, a railway station was built on the side of platform number four and the numbers of trains that utilize this platform have increased, leading the street children to move into the corners of the platform and find other places of stay.

Street children who have been residing in the railway platform for a long time become familiar with the other street children, vendors of that area and police and railway authorities. These children report of facing less harassment in comparison to the children who have recently moved here. The police and railway authorities sometimes ask for money or force the street children to move outside the railway platform, especially in context of the newer children. Often the older children also harass the newer children in the same manner. After some time these children form a group or same age children from other areas come and these children move to other areas to stay.

There is a need to build mechanisms to increase safety of the street children at their places of stay and check their abuse by older children, police and authorities and encourage their stay at day care (24 hour care) centres. Once such mechanisms are inbuilt it would help check the abuses which hinder their constant stay at one place. These children need protection at worksites and regulation of work conditions.

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