

OCCUPATIONAL PROFILE AND PERCEPTIONS OF STREET CHILDREN IN SURAT CITY

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ABSTRACT

Street children constitute a highly vulnerable, most deprived and marginalized section of the society, whose rights are constantly violated with impunity. This study attempts to explore the occupational profile of the street children in the city of Surat and pertinent aspects thereof. This cross-sectional study was conducted by interviewing 326 street children in Surat city.

The study revealed that majority of the street children (79.8%) start earning money as beggars. They soon switch over to other petty jobs/ activities. The street children select their occupation according to their choice of work, availability of an opportunity and the amount of money available to them. Their occupational profile changes according to their age; the period of stay in Surat; and, the money available with them. The earnings of these children fluctuate with the season. Leading five occupation adopted by street children includes Working in eatables and tea stalls (11.7%); Begging and or sweeping (11.3%); Selling newspapers, magazines and books (11.3%); Shoe shining (9.8%) and Selling drinking water bottles & pouches & cold drinks (9.5%).

Shoe shining is mostly carried out by the boys aged more than 12 years. Commercial sex work by girls is considered as inevitable by street girls. Illicit alcohol transport and selling is most lucrative and is often attract street children in to this occupation. Some street children become pick pockets under the guidance of an older pick pocket. Usually children who are very young, have recently come into the streets and their original families are often the most disadvantaged are more likely to engage in Picking up rags work as this requires no capital, no contacts and very less labour.

Key words: Street Children, occupation,

INTRODUCTION

India houses the largest number of street children 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. They constitute a highly vulnerable, most deprived and marginalized section of the society, whose rights are constantly violated with impunity. 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.

Studies have revealed that the common occupations among street children are tailoring, domestic work, wadi work, selling goods, rag picking and many more petty jobs.¹ Studies have revealed that street children also have educational and occupational aspirations. They aspire for various occupations like tailoring, domestic work, wadi work, selling goods, rag

picking and many more. In relation to several occupations mentioned, many respondents hoped to be a part of the medical profession. This was followed by skilled work, the field of education and fashion and personal care. The occupations least aspired for were the religious profession, jobs in the film industry, social work, jobs in the hotel industry, and jobs in sales and marketing.¹⁻³ A majority of the street children had stated that in order to achieve their career goals, they would study hard, work hard or even enroll in relevant courses that would help buffer their career. This study attempts to explore the occupational profile of the street children in the city of Surat and pertinent aspects 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, gernalas, 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 on interest have been declared.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Primary (principal) occupation of the street children

Primary (principal) occupation	Number (%)
Worker in eatables and tea stalls	38 (11.7)
Begging and or sweeping	37 (11.3)
Selling newspapers, magazines and books	37 (11.3)
Shoe shining	32 (9.8)
Selling drinking water bottles & pouches & cold drinks	31 (9.5)
Rag pickers	18 (5.5)
Coolie	17 (5.3)
Chain repairing of luggage	17 (5.3)
Selling eatables	17 (5.3)
Selling small items like key chains, toys, pens, torches, stickers, etc.	13 (4.0)
Car cleaning	11 (3.4)
Selling tobacco and allied products	11 (3.4)
Singing in trains	07 (2.1)
Pickpockets	06 (1.8)
Commercial sex workers (all females)	05 (1.5)
Selling alcohol	05 (1.5)
Working in parking areas	05 (1.5)
Bringing alcohol	04 (1.2)
Selling of charas and ganja	04 (1.2)
Stealing footwear	04 (1.2)
Working in automobile garages	04 (1.2)
Working in hotels	03 (1.0)
Total	326 (100)

Begging is often an initial occupation. The street children had stated that in the beginning, majority of them (79.8%) start earning money as beggars. They soon switch over to other petty jobs/ activities. The street children select their occupation according to their choice of work, availability of an opportunity and the amount of money available to them. Their occupational profile changes according to their age; the

period of stay in Surat; and, the money available with them.

Contacts and recommendations are essential for good employment i.e. hotels and restaurants. Similarly these are also useful while seeking employment in stalls located at the railway platforms and at the bus depots, however with familiarity the street children are gradually accepted by the vendors of that area for giving them an opportunity to work. Generally, service boys brought by another street child working in that shop or a nearby shop are preferred for employment. The owners prefer selecting an alert and efficient boy. Some tea shops, restaurants and lori galla pay wages daily, while other pay on a weekly or a monthly basis. The owners sometimes retain some amount on pretexts and eventually this money is often not given to them and confiscated on pretext of broken utensils or the existence of this amount denied altogether.

The owners of stalls located at the railway platforms, bus depots and nearby sometimes take unknown boys for work as they know that these children are in need of work and they are familiar with street children. These owners typically tend to pay wages on a monthly salary so that a child has to do the work compulsorily atleast for one month; take more work from the children; even after one month did not give the total salary so that the child is forced to work there permanently.

The owners of stalls located away from the railway platforms and the bus depot pay better wages and working conditions are also better. Discussions with these owners revealed that they sometimes face economic problems when dues from regular customers are delayed or when excessive kickbacks or free refreshments have to be paid to inspectors and some sahibs. This problem is coupled with increasing cost of materials; increasing unemployment in the city and increased business competition. However, the rates of tea and other eatables are not raised proportionately every time, so sometimes these vendors are left in a tight spot. Some of them told us "We feel that we should do more for such children but we are helpless".

The earnings of these children fluctuate with the season, for example water selling is brisk in the summer as compared to rainy and winter season. There are times when these children suffer from hardships and change their occupation. The territories of these children are

defined and if breached can lead to group territorial fights and even murder. The street children had reported that some good and truthful shop owners also exist. Usually children continue to work in such establishments and getting entry into such establishments is very high.

9.8 % children are occupation with shoe shining. This occupation is mostly carried out by the boys aged more than 12 years. There are two sub types in this work, one group has a permanent shoe boxes at stations with fixed timings. The sole disadvantage of this is the chances of being stolen in the night timings. Another group is of mobile shoe shiners at platforms and trains, who cover two to three trains and travel eight to ten hours daily in search of customers. Such children usually cultivate a good relation with railway police and ticket checkers who often sympathise with them. The last group is of shoe shiners working near theatres; business centres; office building complexes; and, shopping complexes. These groups never stray into other's territories.

Beggars also have a constant or changing location. Some of them have a fixed location, where they sit down or keep on moving to and fro at the railway station, platform, temple, theatre, market place, signal light, public garden, hotel and eating places. Others often periodically change their location and places for maximising their beggings. They change the temples according to days of the God. During the days of big festivals and on auspicious days they earnings are good and they also get some clothes and food. Beggars of the railway platforms sometimes get some food or eatables from the railway passengers. This solves their meal problem till the next day or till they again become hungry. If, they get both food and money then they use the money for addictions or to see movies and think about their food and money when they become hungry.

The bigger children aged more than 12 years with better body built and with good stamina work as coolies. It is only recently from the past six years that the street children have entered this occupational sector and entry as child coolie needs contacts or recommendations. They have to pass through from several layers of struggles and apprenticeship before entry into this occupation. Licensed coolies oppose street coolies in slack seasons, especially in times of slack work. The licensed coolies complaint to the

railway authorities and some times beat these children and may even not allow them to move on the platform. On the railway stations, passengers often prefer the child coolies these children agree to take lesser amounts, though sometimes this makes these children very angry with the passengers.

Relationships of licensed coolies and child coolies: In majority of the instances, the licensed coolies and the child coolies work at a same place peacefully; support and help each other in times of crisis. Sometimes the older coolies abuse the young coolies. The abuse may be the physical, mental, sexual or financial. It takes about a year for the young coolies to become independent of the licensed coolies and it takes about three to four years for child to become a regular and a licensed coolie by railway authority. Similarly, street children are also engaged as coolies/ hamals at various textile markets and at vegetable markets.

Minor sellers often save and aspire for bigger selling opportunities than other street children. They commonly stay near the railway station area. These children avoid the children staying at the railway platforms. They mostly stay in groups in small shabby rooms on rent in slums areas. They prepare their food by themselves on a rotational basis and often save money from their business and send some amount to their native village and aspire to become somewhat bigger sellers. Their ultimate goal is often to be able to own a shop.

Commercial sex work by girls is considered as inevitable by street girls. These girls work around the railway station area during the night timings and on the cinema road during the day timings. Girls work as CSWs due to poverty and maltreatment in family and the girls engaged in this work feel that working as CWSs is sort of inevitable for street girls. What is very concerning is that all of these girls engaged in commercial sex activity are minors and all of them started providing commercial sex activities when they were 14 to 15 years old. 80% had experienced attempts of sexual molestation by stepfather and male relatives of stepmother at home. They face harassment from the police and antisocial elements and for protection enter into permanent relationship with a male partner. They save for emergency situations like when caught by the police and jurmana has to be paid. Often CSWs have addictions like alcohol, nitro sun tablet, gutka.

Illicit alcohol transport and selling is most lucrative and is seen as easy money. They bring bottles or pouches of alcohol in bulk from other areas and bring it to alcohol dealers or themselves sell them. These children have to remain hidden from the police men, ticket checkers and other gang persons. Whenever caught by the police, they have to bribe the policemen. When the police needs to achieve their target of arresting bootleggers they are thrown in lockup. Though, these children earn good amounts in a short time, they manage to splurge the same speedily in bad habits, for various addictions or for distribution of the money as grafts to policemen, railway authorities.

Illicit Charas and Ganja selling is also lucrative and is seen as easy money. However, the risks if caught are more severe than for alcohol selling as police considers this a heinous activity and the law is harsh with narcotics selling and customers are also more antisocial type.

Train singers remain in groups of two or three. They work at fix timings and in fixed trains and often collect a good amount of money. However, their earnings are handed over to their leader, who protects them and gives them some money for food, stay and treatment etc. Their earnings are lower and sometimes they might be forced to skip some meals.

Stealing footwear can lead to thrashings yet this occupation is habit forming. Many a times they are caught by the public and police and are badly thrashed, yet this is also viewed as "easy money" and do not want to do something laborious. The majority of these continue with this work even after years of living in the streets.

Some street children become pick pockets under the guidance of an older pick pocket. This work is very risky, however the earnings are good and it is viewed by them to be a short cut to earn money easily. They travel in crowded passenger trains. After picking a purse, the children pass it to one another and either alight from the train or change the compartment whenever they get the chance. The earnings are equally divided among each partner. In this work there are good chances that these children can be caught by the police and the public alike from time to time and once caught they are usually badly beaten up. Some times these children manage to snatch a gold chain from the neck of a passenger or an ear ring from a lady or a watch from the wrist of a passenger when the train has just started and

then they run from the platform and drop in an area of darkness by the side of the railway tracks. This group of street is often those with the highest earnings.

Some children work as a rag pickers and sell collected waste materials to scrap whole sellers. This occupation is looked down by other street children as a survival strategy, in line with other studies.⁵ Usually children who are very young, have recently come into the streets and their original families are often the most disadvantaged are more likely to engage in this work as this requires no capital, no contacts and very less labour.⁵⁻⁷

Some children stand at traffic points and whenever a vehicle stops at a traffic point they hurriedly swipe the vehicle with a cloth are called as car cleaners. They are unhappy with the traffic police and report of problems of automobile smoke and dust blowing off the roads. During the rainy season, their earnings are lower and then they tend to shift to other points or try other work also. They have a definite overall perception about various occupations as good, not good or not that good and the reasons thereof in terms of earning potentials and risks thereof as discussed. These perceptions about prestige, earning potentials, threats shape their feelings towards each other and dictate their potential future aspirations, which eventually most of them are able to achieve. However, their aspirations also change with time and their future occupations also mirror their changing aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The occupational profile of street children is invariable associated with the time that they have spent as a street child. When these children arrive for the first time rag picking becomes their first occupation, an occupation that is not contested by other street children and does not require any skills. With the passage of time these children gain familiarity and acceptance in the local milieu. Then comes a phase when they aspire and achieve to quite an extent other occupations. These occupational aspirations are shaped as per their perceptions of good or bad and are ever dynamic in nature.

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