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Protection of Children Living on the Streets

KEY STATISTICS

Location of children	Number of children
Dhaka	249,200
Chittagong	55,856
Rajshahi	20,426
Khulna	41,474
Barisal	9,771
Sylhet	13,165
Bangladesh (total)	679,728
Bangladesh (total projected for 2014)	1,144,754
Bangladesh (total projected for 2024)	1,615,330

Source: 'Estimation of the Size of Street Children and their Projection for Major Urban Areas of Bangladesh 2005' commissioned to BIDS by ARISE

BACKGROUND

Cities in Bangladesh are overcrowded with dense slums, squatter settlements and pavement dwellings, each home to thousands of children. Increasing rural poverty and corresponding urban migration continue to swell the numbers of people living in urban slums and on the streets. Problems of rural unemployment, landlessness, river erosion, natural disaster, family conflict and weak law and order cause rural families to leave their homes in search of better prospects in the urban centres. This movement contributes to the disintegration of traditional family and community structures and results in an increasing number of children being exposed to deprivation and abuse in urban areas.

Children living on the streets fall into several categories, often related to the socio-economic conditions that led to their situation. Many children live with their families, either on the streets or in slum houses. Other children live on their own because they have been orphaned or abandoned by their parents. Children also run away from their families or caregivers, fleeing poverty and physical abuse, and end up living and working alone on the streets.

Although no comprehensive and reliable statistics are available on the actual numbers, living conditions, needs and interests of children living on the streets, estimates predict a continuing increase in the number of these children.

Thousands of children on the streets of Bangladesh are being denied their rights according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which recognises that

every child is entitled to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

ISSUES

Denial of rights and exploitation

Children living on the streets are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Even when these children live with their families, poverty and a lack of services means that most parents are not in a position to provide appropriate care. Children grow up on the margins of society without appropriate accommodation, protection, education, health care, food, drinking water, security, recreation and guidance.

These children also endure increased risks to their safety and well-being. Many of them work, often in hazardous and low-waged jobs, to support themselves and their families. Unequal distribution of resources, low family incomes and unemployment of parents and guardians means that many families depend on their children's earnings to survive. Across Bangladesh, children contribute, on average, between 20 and 30 per cent of the family income.

Girls and boys who work do not have access to education and become trapped in a cycle of low-skilled, low-income employment that further pushes them into the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Children who live on the street are also vulnerable to other forms of exploitation and frequently find themselves the victims of sexual abuse and at risk of HIV/AIDS infection, physical torture, and trafficking. Extensive criminal networks make substantial profits by engaging children in commercial sex work, smuggling, stealing, and the distribution of drugs and weapons. Without appropriate care and continually struggling to survive, many children have no other option.

Psycho-social problems

Following the hardship and abuse of life on the streets, many children suffer trauma and psycho-social disorders. Because of their distressing experiences, they often become diffident and distrustful, making it difficult for service providers to help them.

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Marginalization and criminalization
Children living on the streets are often abused or oppressed by police, who frequently beat them, ask for bribes, take away their valuables and implicate them in false charges. Ordinary members of society stigmatize these children, which further isolates them from the general community.

Children living on the streets are regularly arrested for vagrancy. The age of criminal responsibility is nine, which

means that children are often sentenced to terms in prison or in child development centres (correction centres).

Institutionalization - in vagrant homes, child development centres, custody homes or orphanages - is often viewed as an appropriate response, rather than a last resort. Many of the children in institutions have little or no contact with their families. This isolation inhibits their normal development and further challenges their long-term integration within the community. In addition, there is a lack of minimum care standards in institutions and no regular monitoring mechanisms of the care provided, which leaves children vulnerable to abuse.

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Poor child-protection mechanisms

Although Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO Convention 182 concerning the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, there is no legal framework for children who work in informal sectors, such as street vending or domestic labour. Laws governing other, more regulated, industries are often poorly enforced.

ACTION

Together with the Government of Bangladesh Ministry of Social Welfare, Department of Social Services, UNICEF is working to protect and assist children living in the street and in institutions through the Protection of Children at Risk (PCAR) Project.

Outreach services and non-formal education

The first contact with children living on the streets is established through regular outreach activities. Teachers and social workers identify children living on the streets and encourage them to attend non-formal education programmes and to use the services available at the drop in centres. A peer to peer approach is also very effective where peer volunteers also conduct outreach activities to their fellow peers encouraging their participation. Because the situations of children living on the streets vary considerably, the PCAR project sponsors several types of schooling: open air schools in parks, markets and other public spaces, and non formal education in drop-in centres.

Those who are successful in the non-formal education programmes are encouraged to attend regular school or further vocational training. While children are attending open air

schools, the teacher or social worker can better assess their situation. Furthermore, social workers will be interacting with families of children, particularly those attending open air schools, to identify services for referrals such as livelihood opportunities, income-generating activities that would strengthen the families' economic status and parental responsibilities for their children.

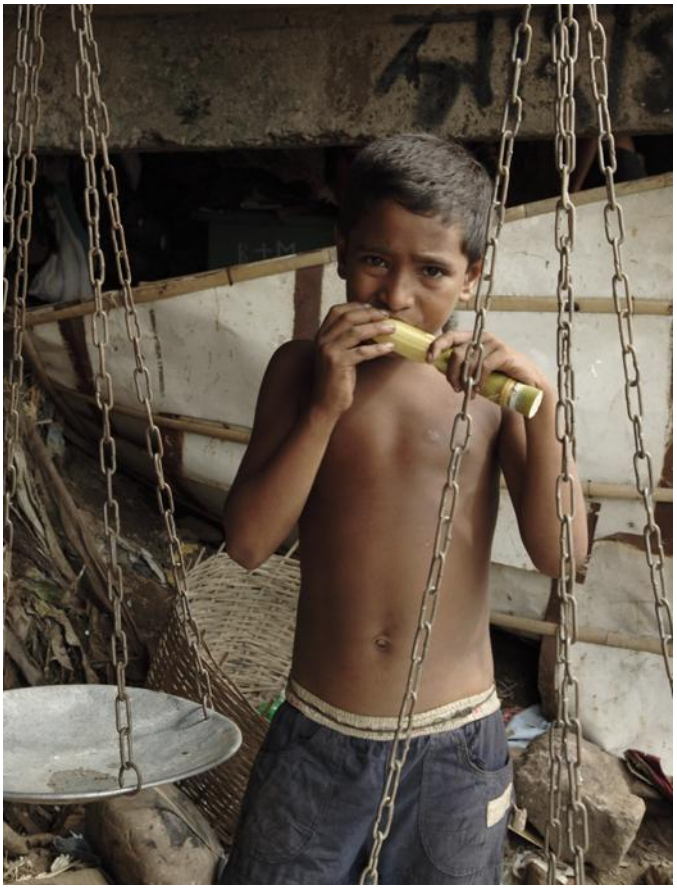
Vocational and life skills training

Referrals to vocational training and life-skills training are available at drop in centres. The training courses include instruction in particular trades, education in business development for children already engaged as street vendors and those planning to start their own businesses, and personal development sessions on topics such as communication, critical thinking, self-esteem and negotiation.

Children who successfully complete vocational training are assisted with job placement in non-hazardous environments or are provided with starting-capital for their own small businesses. The personal development and life-skills sessions help children cope with the everyday challenges of their lives.

Shelter and services

The PCAR project supports drop in centres to help children living on the streets achieve their rights to a protective environment, safe food and water, health care and education. Outreach workers encourage children to attend the centres and make use of available services. Emergency night shelters for immediate care and protection of children living in the streets have been operating since July 2009 in Dhaka, Barisal and Chittagong.



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The centres offer recreation facilities and planned activities that promote social interaction and assist traumatized children to relax, away from the pressures of street life. Combined with the para-counselling available through the centres, children are able to overcome past traumas, build their own self-esteem, and increase their capacity to integrate within the community. Children suffering from severe psychological disorders are referred to expert clinics.

Preventive and curative health concerns are addressed at the drop in centres through paramedic visits, with referral services to partner NGO health centres and government clinics and hospitals. Behavioral change and communication sessions are organized on issues such as STDs, HIV/AIDS prevention, and reproductive health.

The centres provide 24-hour resting and sleeping areas, bathing and toilet facilities, lockers and three meals every day for children who live on the streets. Caretakers live in the centre with the children.

All children attending the centres are registered with birth certificates and have access to legal aid advice.

Social integration (family and community reintegration)

One of the most difficult challenges facing children living on the streets is marginalization from their communities who commonly see them as dangerous mischief makers and thieves. Cultural programmes and public events at the drop in centres contribute to the community sensitization efforts of the programme. The centres also have a center-based management committee comprised of community leaders (religious, informal and government leaders, etc) to address challenges between centres and communities and promote the community's active involvement such as through sponsorship and in-kind donations for the well being of the children. Encouraging interaction between children living on the streets and their communities helps change public perception and assists with integration.

Children living on the streets are encouraged to return to their families whenever this is a secure and viable option. The PCAR project helps children locate their families and assists with family reunification, reconciliation, family counseling, follow up visits and livelihood support programmes to promote reintegration. Older children are offered community-based transitional accommodation and care. These initiatives are intended to integrate children into the society.

Improving care standards

UNICEF assists with the development and implementation of minimum care standards in institutions that care for children without parental care including those previously living on the streets, in development centres and orphanages. Dialogue with the administrative committees and the training of staff on child-friendly behaviours ensures that the institutions provide appropriate support to all children. UNICEF is also developing guidelines for social workers on minimum care standards for children returning to their communities to build upon a national assessment currently being undertaken on institutional care. The assessment will be the basis for developing alternative care policies so that children may be housed with extended family members according to traditional kinship systems, rather than in institutions.

NGOs and government agencies who work regularly with street children are collaborating with UNICEF to develop strategies that promote safe environments and child-friendly policies.

Advocacy for social policy and legislative reform

UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs to review legislation for children, (the *Children's Act 1974*). UNICEF is also advocating for every child's right to receive family care and facilitating the review of all child-related policies for the development of comprehensive national child-friendly legislation.

IMPACT

UNICEF took over the PCAR project (previously called ARISE) from UNDP in 2007. UNICEF seeks to improve and expand the protection, education, health and development opportunities for children living on the streets. In 2009, in total about 8000 children will

benefit from PCAR interventions in 68 open air schools, 18 drop-in centres and three emergency night shelters out of which so far:

- 7,800 children received health care services
  6,900 children have completed the six month course on non formal education
- 6,200 children have received life skills training
- 2,900 children availed drop in centers' services including emergency night shelters
- 820 children received vocational/skills training
- 631 children were placed with jobs and/or self employed
- 476 children received need based psychosocial support
- 241 children were reintegrated with their families or communities
- 47 children received legal aid support.

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