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Community perceptions of home environments that lead children & youth to the street in semi-rural Kenya



Sarah Seidel^{a,b,*}, James Muciimi^c, James Chang^d, Stanley Gitari^c, Philip Keiser^d,
Michael L. Goodman^{b,d}

^a University of Texas School of Public Health, Austin, TX 78701, United States

^b Sodzo International, OVC Research Division, 4100 South Main, Houston, TX 77002, United States

^c Maua Methodist Hospital, Maua, Meru County, Kenya

^d University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX 77551, United States

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ABSTRACT

Research with street-involved children and youth (SICY) in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past three decades has established a complex web of both micro and macro-level factors that simultaneously "push" and "pull" children and youth to the street. There is still little research with adult family and community members in communities from which SICY originate. Forty men and women from five semi-rural villages in Meru County, Kenya participated in a Rapid Rural Appraisal utilizing a fishbone diagram to explore main and underlying reasons for why children may be or may feel unwelcome in the home and thus migrate to the street. Responses were analyzed in terms of ecological levels, child or parent perspective, and the push/pull framework. Overall, community members identified families and households experiencing stress and lacking the necessary resources to successfully adjust and adapt. Four ecological levels of influence were proposed as main reasons, with parent and caregiver factors mentioned most often, followed by household factors, children's intrapersonal factors, and interpersonal (family) factors. Community and environmental level factors were also proposed as underlying factors. Analysis by gender revealed that both men and women emphasized push factors over pull factors, though men proposed more pull factors (from peers and street life) than women did. Men placed more responsibility on the children than women did, citing children's negative behaviors, dissatisfaction with home, and a desire for independence and work/income. Women, in contrast, emphasized children's feelings of being unloved and the experience of harsh punishment or abuse from caregivers. Findings suggest that interventions to reduce street involvement should support economically, medically, and psychologically vulnerable families and households through comprehensive family strengthening programs that build financial capacity, improve parenting and communication skills, and promote education over child work and labor.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Research with street-involved children and youth (SICY) over the past three decades has established a complex web of conditions

* Corresponding author at: Sodzo International, OVC Research Division, 4100 South Main, Houston, TX 77002, United States.

E-mail address: sarah.seidel@sodzointernational.org (S. Seidel).

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that simultaneously “push” and “pull” children and youth to the street (Kaime-Atterhög, 1996; Plummer, Kudrati, & Yousif, 2007). Factors contributing to children and youth working and living on the street in Sub-Saharan Africa are macro-level – e.g. poverty, drought and famine, rural-urban migration, political or civil unrest and violence, orphanhood, and the burden of HIV/AIDS – as well as micro-level, often classified as “breakdown in the family” – inter alia abuse, physical and emotional neglect, mental illness, substance abuse, and family structural shifts due to death, divorce, and polygyny (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2014; Awad, 2003; Githaiga, Kiptiony, & Kay, 2015; Kilbride, Suda, & Njeru, 2000; Matchinda, 1999; Olley, 2006; Plummer et al., 2007; Suda, 1997; Veale & Donà, 2003; Young, 2004). Unfortunately, there exists scant research of children and youth living on the streets of semi-rural Sub-Saharan African towns beginning to urbanize. These semi-rural towns represent a unique context because rural areas tend to be more culturally and linguistically homogenous than urban or peri-urban environments. Thus, how a smaller semi-rural community perceives and addresses social issues may be different than in a more heterogeneous and disparate urban setting. As more and more children arrive on the streets of semi-rural towns in Sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically East Africa and Kenya, the unique context of their migration and lived experience requires further investigation.

Research surrounding SICY throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia, and North America has identified child, family, and environmental risk factors for children’s street involvement (Aptekar & Stoecklin, 2014; Embleton, Lee, Gunn, Ayuku, & Braitstein, 2016). Additionally, research with both families and street-involved children has been useful in understanding both adult and youth perspectives on home environments and why youth may migrate to the street (see e.g. Abdelgalil, Gurgel, Theobald, & Cuevas, 2004; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). In SSA, however, most research has been conducted with children and youth and has not included adult (caregiver or other) perspectives in the community (see e.g. Strobbe, Olivetti, & Jacobson, 2013 and Goodman, Martinez, Keiser, Gitari, & Seidel, 2017 as exceptions). Strengthening protective factors at the family and community levels has the potential to moderate many of the previously identified risks for street involvement (Jessor et al., 2003; Masten, 2011; Eriksson, Cater, Andershed, & Andershed, 2010). In semi-rural communities in SSA, adult community members are therefore crucial partners in the prevention of street migration. Additionally, as extended family, neighbors, and other caregiving adults, these community members represent the best and most feasible option for SICY’s respite, fostering or adoption, and full reintegration into households and the community. This article addresses the limited research with adults in the context of SICY in SSA, and specifically East Africa and Kenya, by detailing adult perspectives of caregiver/parent characteristics and the home environments leading children to the streets of semi-rural Kenyan towns, and discusses implications for interventions to prevent street migration of children and youth.

1.2. Research question

With the aim of providing key insights for the planning and development of a rescue center and reintegration program as well as for household and community-level prevention strategies to address the problem of children and youth living on the streets of semi-rural Meru County, Kenya, a Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) (Chambers, 1994) was conducted by Maua Methodist Hospital in June 2014 as part of a formative program evaluation (quantitative survey of children living on the streets reported elsewhere; see Seidel, Chang, Mwangera, Gitari, & Goodman, 2017). The rapid rural appraisal method, a qualitative participatory community research tool was chosen for its ability to gain insight into the local community’s shared experiences, perspectives and belief systems in a time and resource-limited researching setting. The goal of the RRA was to understand community perceptions around SICY and why children or youth might leave home for the street. A fishbone diagram activity (see e.g. Minnesota Department of Health, 2016) was used to explore the following question: *Why is a child unwelcome in the home?* Researchers chose to pose the question from a risk (as opposed to a causal) perspective focusing on the child’s position of being or feeling unwelcome in the home. This was for two purposes: (1) Program planners and researchers sought to understand home environments in which children were at risk for leaving for the street in order to identify upstream intervention targets (i.e. before children arrive on the streets). (2) Additionally, researchers did not want participants to feel stigmatized by direct questions about factors previously identified by local SICY in the community (e.g. asking them about poverty, abuse, abandonment) (unpublished data, 2013). The literal interpretation of the question in English suggests researchers were only asking about situations in which children were actually unwelcome in their home; however, the community discussions addressed both reasons why a child is unwelcome and why a child *feels* unwelcome.

2. Methods

2.1. Study setting

Maua is a town of approximately 49,000 people, of whom roughly a third are classified as urban or peri-urban, and is the capital of the Igembe District in the northern part of Meru County, Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and ICF Macro (2010)). The number of SICY in Maua and surrounding larger market towns is estimated by local hospital staff to be 1000 (local interviews). Maua Town and Meru County are home to the Ameru (Meru) people who make up roughly 6% of Kenya’s total population (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) & ICF Macro, 2010). They share a common language (Kimeru), cultural traditions and beliefs. Meru County, like most of Kenya, is primarily agricultural land, and the county’s major cash crops are miraa (khat), tea, and bananas. The Meru also grow a wide variety of legumes, fruits, and other vegetables, and most towns have bustling market centers with the population living on the periphery (semi-urban) or further away in small rural communities of compounds (shambas) consisting of houses, arable land, and animals (Jaetzold, Schmidt, Hornetz, & Shisanya, 2006).

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