Children working in the streets of Colombian cities: Different pathways to the street lead to different populations

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ABSTRACT

Street children can be found worldwide, but their prevalence is higher in developing countries such as Colombia. The present study tests the hypothesis that there are three different populations of children in the streets of Colombian cities. 1. *Homeless children*, 2. *Displaced children*, and 3. *Working children*. Using data from the study *Trabajo infantil en las calles de ciudades Latinoamericanas* and multinomial logistic regression, the type of population was regressed on sociodemographic and work-related variables. When compared with *working children*, *displaced children* are more likely to be under 5 years old, to have adult supervision, and to beg. They are less likely to have a social security affiliation. *Homeless children* are likely to be older, to work for longer periods of hours, to be boys, and to beg. They are less likely to attend school. The study supports the hypothesis that there are three different populations of children in the streets of Colombian cities. The results suggest that different approaches to improving the lives of these three groups of children are needed.

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1. Introduction

According to one estimate, six out of ten people dwelling in the streets of the world are under 18 years of age (UNICEF, 2005). Children live on the street in most large cities, but greater numbers live on the streets in cities of the developing countries. Colombia is one such country. Although the number of street children is unknown, the Colombian National Department of Statistics estimated that approximately 2.5% of the country's approximately 16 million children work in the streets (DANE & IPEC, 2001). They can be seen at corners, traffic lights, bus stops, and parking places in all cities in Colombia.

This situation is of concern to health professionals, social workers, and educators, because street children are a very vulnerable population. Some children are forced to work in the streets in order to satisfy their personal and in many cases their family's needs. They are not only exposed to all risks related to working at young ages, but also exposed to the dangers of the streets. The fact that their work place is a public space leaves street children unprotected and exposed to dangers that other children do not incur: cars, social violence, prosecution by authorities, sexual abuse, aggressive homeless men, prostitution networks, and other criminal elements. Children have to fight for a place to work with the rest of people in the streets and many times have to pay for it (Cárdenas, Rivera, Boteman & Aguirre, 2000; Irwanto, 2002; Pick, Ross & Dada, 2002; UNICEF Colombia & Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002).

Not all children both live and work in the streets. Although street children are treated as a homogenous population, research has recognized at least *two* different kinds of populations – homeless children and working children (DANE, 2002; Scanlon, Tomkins, Lynch & Scanlon, 1998) – and other research has suggested that there may be *three* different populations of street children (Pinzon, Briceño, Gomez & Latorre, 2003). The present study tests whether there are different populations of street

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children in Colombian cities. The knowledge of the types of populations in the streets is relevant because, if there are different populations in the streets, intervention programs would need to be adapted to fulfill their distinct needs.

2. Background and literature review

Previous research has defined street children as young people under 18 years of age who spend most of their time on the streets. According to UNICEF there are two kinds of street children: *Home based* — children with family support and a home — and *street based* — children that live in the streets (Scanlon et al., 1998).

A concern with the stated definition of street children lies in its ambiguity. What does it mean to spend most of the time in the street? The cutoff for *most of the time* is not clear, and the concept excludes children that work in the streets for less than *most of the time*. Although it sounds inappropriate to call the latter group of children *street children*, it may be inappropriate to ignore them. Furthermore, would a child that spends most of his/her time playing on the streets be classified as a street child? The definition does not take into account the activity of children spending time in the street. The present study uses the term *children working in the streets* to include all people under 18 years of age who have worked for money in the streets at least 5 h a week for at least 1 month and to exclude those that spend most of the time in the streets playing. This usage is consistent with Colombian legislation and acknowledges the risk factors that children working in the streets face even if they work for short periods of time.

This paper uses as its theoretical framework family stress theory as described by McKenry and Price (2005). Families, systems that function to ensure growth and survival to its members, are constantly exposed to different kinds of stressors that they need to manage. The paper follows the "ABC-X formulation" in which a stressor event (A) interacts with family resources (B) and the meaning attached to the event by the family (C) to produce stress, a crisis, or a coping mechanism (X).

Its is assumed that there are at least three different kinds of stressors — abuse and neglect, displacement, and poverty — that affect Colombian families mobilizing their resources and beliefs in ways that lead to the coping mechanism — presence of their children in the streets. Besides differences in stressors, it is reasonable to conclude that resources and beliefs function in a different way for each of them, and that these differences can be identified by analyzing the characteristics of the children working in the streets. Characteristics of each child could tell us about the pathway that led him/her to the streets. If this was true, it would be possible to differentiate the following populations: *homeless children, displaced children* and *working children*. These three groups and their characteristics are described below.

2.1. Homeless children

(A) Stressors: Many researchers have found that homeless children are generally children who had been exposed to high levels of child abuse and neglect at home (Hyde, 2005; Lalor, 1999) and/or high levels of conflict with their parents (Rosenthal, Mallett & Myers, 2006). Generally, these children come from disintegrated or dysfunctional families, in which poverty, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and peer pressure are common (Abdelgalil, Gurgel, Theobald & Cuevas, 2004; Ribeiro & Trench Ciampone, 2001).

(B) Resources: Children need to leave their homes and the society does not have a different alternative for them. Children go to the streets as their only choice because child protection systems do not have the required infrastructure to support them (Hyde, 2005). The Colombian protection system has the capacity to protect only about 10% of all abused children in the country, a calculation based on data from UNICEF and the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar & Ministerio de Salud, 2002; Unicef, 2003).

Many children who end up living in the streets have worked in the streets before, have been introduced to the streets by a sibling or other relative, or have previously met a person who showed them the streets as an alternative (UNICEF Colombia & Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002). Children are more likely to make the decision and leave their family house if they feel they can become self sufficient (Scanlon et al., 1998).

(C) Beliefs: The belief in male superiority or *machismo* is common in Latin American societies and Colombia is no exception. Boys are thought to be more self sufficient than girls and working is their societal role.

(X) Stress or crisis or coping mechanism: Children move to live in the streets to escape an intolerable situation at home.

As a result of the above, we expect the following to characterize this group of children:

1) *Amount of time spent working.* These children are more likely to spend most of their day working in the streets than the other groups. Since they live in the streets, they would not have a definitive work schedule, and their leisure time would be limited by their work time.

2) *Adult supervision.* They would be less likely to be supervised by adults than other children because they have left their families and live by themselves or with other children.

3) *Education and Social Security.* They are less likely to have their basic needs met because they are not being protected by their parents or society. These basic needs include education and social security affiliation, such as health care.

4) *Occupation.* They would be more likely to beg or perform tasks that do not require equipment than other children because of the inability to purchase the required implements for other activities.

5) *Gender and age.* The majority are boys because machismo would make them believe that it is easier for them to be self sufficient in the streets. They are likely to be older, too, because their seniority would help them to be self sufficient.