

Chinese policy reaction to the problem of street children: An analysis from the perspective of street children

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Abstract

The effectiveness of the government-managed Protection and Education Centre for Street Children program in China was examined based on a 7-month ethnographic study of street children in public streets and at the centre in Shanghai. The program's intermediate goals are to provide education and protection for street children, and its ultimate goal is to restore them back to their own families. However, this study shows that most of the street children disliked the high security of the centre and many had rejected going home. So they tended to keep away from the centre even though it could provide them with lodging and food. It is suggested that the policy for street children should be reviewed with consideration given to street children's family situations and the children's own thoughts and preferences. The programs at the Centre should be enriched and training of staff should be provided.

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1. Introduction

With the number of street children increasing, different countries have developed different programs to serve this population (Ferguson, Dabir, Dortzbach, Dyrness, & Spruijt-Metz, 2006; Karabanow, 1999, 2003). In China, street children have also drawn attention from the central government. The Protection and Education Centre for Street Children (PEC) is the institution established under the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) to serve street children. To examine how well the program is dealing with the problem, a study was carried out in Shanghai, the largest city in China. The study examined the Chinese welfare program for street children from the perspective of the children themselves.

2. The Protection and Education Centre for Street Children (PEC)

In 1995, the MCA established the Protection and Education Centre for Street Children (PEC) to provide care and protection to street children. Since 1995, about 150,000 child admissions have been handled each year (MCA, 2003b). This officially released figure is believed to account for just a small percentage of the actual population (Zhang & Yang,

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2002). The MCA requires every city to establish one PEC to “protect and educate” street children. By 2006, the number of government funded and managed PECs had reached 130 (Jiang, 2006). Through the PECs, the state provides temporary care for street children and arranges for them to be returned to their homes whenever possible.

There is no official manual guiding the operation of the PECs. The core guiding references are the 1991 *Law of People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors* (Law of People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors, 1991), which was introduced to protect children in general, and the *Measures to Help Migrants with No Means of Livelihood in Urban Cities* (MCA, 2003a), which was developed to help migrants without any means of support in urban areas. Neither document targets street children. PECs would design their services according to their own, differing interpretations of the documents and their resources. The MCA encourages PECs in different areas to design their own ways of tackling the problem of street children (MCA, 2005).

In accordance with the *Measures to Help Migrants with No Means of Livelihood in Urban Cities* (2003) developed by the central government, the PECs generally provide the children with basic necessities, shelter, and emergency medical care. The MCA suggests that the PECs provide the necessary psychological counselling and education for the children. But such services are not mandatory. The general practice is that as soon as the children enter the PEC, the centre will try to contact the children's parents or guardians. If the parents can be reached, the children will be escorted back to their homes by the staff of the PEC or directly collected by their guardians. If the children's guardians cannot be located for a long period of time, the children will be transferred to child welfare institutions or other government institutions for children.¹

The MCA expects to achieve the following goals through the operation of the PECs: 1) to ensure that at least 70% of the street children get education, protection and knowledge of self-protection from the PEC; 2) to ensure that at least 90% of the street children obtain help and education from society, and get government relief when necessary; and 3) to ensure that at least 60% of the street children are well settled after receiving help and protection from the centre (Zhang, 1999). The PEC program has been operating for nearly 10 years. Has it achieved the anticipated goals? Has the program effectively helped street children? Few data are available to answer these questions, although the MCA continues to urge local governments to establish more PECs.

3. The research site — Shanghai

The PECs are set up in large cities in China where a large number of street children are found. Shanghai was chosen as the site for this study as it is the largest city in China. For the past 15 years, Shanghai has experienced dramatic development both socially and economically. More and more people from different parts of China are moving to Shanghai, trying to realize their dreams. According to official statistics, by the end of the year 2003, there were about 5 million migrants in Shanghai, and about 608,000 of them were children less than 14 years old (Shanghai Statistics Bureau, 2004). Increasing numbers of children from all over the country are entering Shanghai and becoming street children (Hu, 2003; Ma, 2003; Wu, 2003).

4. Methodology

4.1. Data collection

This study is part of a larger research project on street children in China. Street children are defined as those children who stay out of their homes or schools and spend most of their time in public places of the city, with little or no responsible adult supervision or protection. The project adopted an ethnographic approach that allows the researcher to build a close relationship with the children by long-term interaction, and provides the chance to explore their life in a natural setting (Bemak, 1996; Young & Barrett, 2001a). In this study, the street children were approached in two main areas: the PEC and the streets (including the Shanghai Railway Station Plaza, the small canteens and the enclosed abolished garden in the neighbourhood of the railway station, the underground mass transit railway, and other places they frequented). One of the authors stayed in Shanghai from April to September 2005 and returned in January 2006 for data collection, spending two to five days in the street and one to two days in the PEC each week. A total of 122 days'

¹ There is no official regulation specifying the time period that street children can spend at the centre. In China, government child welfare institutions seldom accept children who are not orphans.

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