Life Experiences of Children Living on Streets in Kenya: from the Pot into the Fire

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored life experiences of children living on the streets in Eldoret, Kenya. A total of 15 children (males = 60% and females = 40%; aged 6 to 18 years) took part in the study. The authors thematically analyzed data collected through individual interviews to explore life at their homes which resulted in them living on the streets and life on the streets itself. Implications are further discussed, and the authors propose that affirmative action is needed to strengthen families so that children could be rescued from the streets and be reintegrated into their families.

Keywords Life experiences · Children · Living · Street · Kenya

Introduction

The problem of children living on streets is a worldwide phenomenon and many capitals and urban centers of the world have become a haven of survival for many children in distress (Boakye-Boaten 2008). According to Goodman et al. (2016), the number of children living on the street in Kenya is estimated to be 250, 000. These numbers include the children living on the streets of Eldoret, a town in Kenya. There has been increasing attention to the presence of the children living on streets in Kenya, mainly in major urban areas of Nairobi and Western Kenya (Goodman et al. 2017). This calls for further research to find out the underlying factors that may be driving them to the street, in addition to exploring if street life is more accommodative to their needs than their homes. In his study, Pillay (2016) suggests that structural or systemic poverty, abuse, and neglect by parents or guardians compel some orphans and vulnerable children to seek alternative living arrangements. In most cases, if their biological parents

were deceased or were unable to care for them, children would have been cared for by aunts or grandparents, but whenever they have nowhere to go, they opt for the street for survival (Cottrell-Boyce 2010). Of note, contemporary society is becoming more individualistic and materialistic and may not be ready to care for other people's children due to added responsibility.

In the Kenyan context, children living on the street are referred to as “*chokora*”, roughly translated from the Kiswahili language that refers to scavengers or pokers at dustbins or garbage heaps in search of food and other valuables (Kilbride et al. 2000). According to Aufseeser (2017) these children are being viewed as either victims or delinquents and are considered “out of place” on the streets. Nobody cares for their well-being, whether they get food or not, if they are sick or not and if they sleep safely at night or not. According to UNICEF (2001), these are children whose street has become their habitual abode and/or a source of livelihood, they are inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults. Lack of proper support for these children may lead to antisocial behaviours, school dropout, and may cause them to become a threat to the social fabric of society (Mwoma and Pillay 2015). A study carried out in Eastern Cape, South Africa revealed that children living on streets experienced stigmatization and humiliation from the general public (Chireshe et al. 2010). This can make them dive into the shelves of despair as a result of life experiences that may undermine their developmental progression, as well as emotional health and functioning in future (Nader 2011). Children

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in such circumstances are at risk of losing opportunities for schooling, decent living and meeting their psychosocial needs (Mwoma and Pillay 2015).

Although many studies have been done about children living on the street (Cottrell-Boyce 2010; Kilbride et al. 2000), there is limited research that explore their life experiences both at their homes and on the streets. More precisely, not much is known about the kinds of life experiences of children living on the streets of Eldoret. Through several interactions with children living on streets, the researchers became acutely aware of the need to find out more about life experiences that make children to transit from home to the street. In a study in Eldoret, Kenya, Ayaya and Esamai (2001) argued that the public look at these children as nuisance and abuses them in many ways. While in Russia, such children may be rejected as “having bad genes” (Fujimura 2003). The findings of the study are meant to demystify this general perception of children living on the streets and justify why there are many children living on the streets not only in Eldoret town but in cities of every nation globally. Therefore, the researchers felt the need to answer the question: What are the life experiences of children living on the streets of Eldoret, Kenya?

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Bio-Ecological System Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). In this theory, Bronfenbrenner explicates that the world of the child consists of five systems of interaction: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. This bio-ecological system theory is applicable for this study since it gives the highlights of how each system can contribute to development of children. Each system depends on the contextual nature of the person's life and offers an ever-growing diversity of options and sources of growth (Swick and Williams 2006). The microsystem consists of the child's most immediate environment (physically, socially and psychologically), which is the core entity for initially learning about the world (Bronfenbrenner 1989). For children living on streets, this microsystem provides them with painful memories due to the experiences that made them escape to the street. The mesosystem is supposed to provide the connection between the structures of the child's microsystem (Berk 2000), and if these structures are not supportive, the child may end up looking for alternative ways of survival like living on the street.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1989), the macrosystem consist of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other, broader social context. The chronosystem is a system that encompasses the dimension of time as it relates to a child's environments of evolution, development or stream of development of the external systems in time and can cover either a short or long period of time (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

As children get older, they may react differently to environmental changes and may be more able to determine how that change will influence them (Härkönen 2005). These systems are expected to provide the nurturing centerpiece for the child but in some instances, they fail; they become a haunting set of memories of one's earliest encounters with violence (Rogoff 2003), hence leading to an exodus of many children to the street. According to Dybicz (2005), the estimate of children living on the streets of every town is extremely high especially in developing countries. This means that the microsystem has failed in nurturing practices and so the necessary services for children have dwindled down significantly leading to great exodus of children to the streets.

Methodology

Design

This qualitative study utilized individual interviews for data collection. Qualitative research explores aspects of human life that cannot adequately be covered by quantitative research (Charmaz and McMullen 2011), and it was seen as appropriate for this study for exploring life experiences that children living on the street face. The focus was on the life experiences that made them exit from home and their subsequent life experiences on the streets. Further, the interviews were conducted using Kiswahili (local language), which was more accommodative to participants based on their age and education background, bearing in mind that they were not currently at school.

Participants

The participants in the study were children living on the streets of Eldoret in Kenya. A total of 15 children (males = 60%, and females = 40%; aged 6 to 18 years) took part in the study. The participants were obtained through convenient sampling, because the children living on streets tend to be unpredictable in their place of stay. It is important to note that collecting accurate information about children living on streets can be challenging due to a number of reasons, such as street child mobility, distrust of strangers, and the sensitive and sometimes life traumatic nature of their experiences (WHO 2000). Since the study was purely qualitative, a small sample was selected so as to provide rich information which the study was set to obtain.

Data Collection Method

In qualitative research, the most appropriate method of data collection is interviews (Savin-Baden and Major 2013) and for this study, unstructured interviews were used. The

interview guide was written in English and translated to Kiswahili so that all participants were able to express themselves freely since all of them understood that language. The interview lasted for about 1 hour for each participant. Life experience interviews began with basic demographic questions, such as age, parental status, last class attended in school and length of time spent on the street. This was then followed by what might have prompted them to escape from home to live on the street. Questions were further asked about their life experiences on the street and suggestions of what could be done to alleviate their current life experiences. For purposes of data analysis, the responses were translated to English by one of the teachers of English who is also conversant with Kiswahili language.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Ministry of Social Services in Kenya as well as the Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Education at the university in which the primary author is based. Since the children stay independently on the street, each of them was approached and invited to take part in the study. Those who accepted the invitation were fully informed about the nature of the study and were requested to read and sign an assent letter before their participation in any research activity. All the participants were assured of confidentiality of the information they were going to provide during the interview. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw any time they wished to. To convince them on the issue of confidentiality and privacy, the children were told not to write their names on the assent letter. Since children living on streets were living an independent life, they were the only ones to give assent to take part in the study. Each of them consented to audio-recording of the interviews. No names were mentioned throughout the interview so as to ensure anonymity of participants. There was a counseling psychologist standby who was ready to be contacted in case any of the children remembered unpleasant or disturbing memories in their lives.

Data Analysis

The audio recorded data from interviews was translated from Kiswahili language to English and was transcribed based on the demographic information of the participants. For data analysis Smith's (1996) approach was applied. This approach endorses the following steps; identification of common themes, generalization of experiences, manual coding of common themes, identification of key emerging themes and finally interpretation of data. An inductive approach was used to identify key themes about life experiences of participants at home and on the street. The data was coded based on gender (B for boy and G for girl) and the age of each participant (P).

Results

Data collected through individual interviews were thematically analyzed to explore two categories of life experiences of the participants, namely; life at their homes which resulted in them living on the streets and life on the streets itself. Life experiences at their homes were associated with parental status (psychological distress, neglect, and physical and verbal abuse) and life experiences associated with street life were fear, exposure to emotional and physical abuse, and exposure to substance use and abuse. These findings are discussed based on these two categories with the actual words of the participants.

Life Experiences at Homes

In order to understand life experiences that children faced in their homes before exiting to the street, each participant was requested to respond to the following broad statement: "Please tell me the kind of life you were living at your home before you came to the street." This inquiry was supported by other questions that assisted the participant to remain on course. The responses of participants indicated that while they were still at their homes they had painful experiences caused by death of parents, parental divorce and parental mistreatment. The children experienced psychological distress, they felt neglected and they were physically and verbally abused. These findings are supported by verbatim narratives given by participants as discussed below.

Psychological Distress

This study established that the death of the parents, parental divorce and parental mistreatment rendered the children to psychological distress manifested by fear, anxiety, hopelessness, and perpetual sadness, despair and insecurity. Some of the children shared their psychological distress in the following verbal quotes: "*When I was at home I used to cry every night when I was alone and even here on the street because I miss my parents so much*" (P5, G aged 9). "*I used to see my death parents every night when I am asleep and I could get so scared*" (P3, G aged 10). Similar information was added by another participant: "*I used to dream every night that my mom was standing near my bed and could wake up and start screaming. My aunty used to beat me and said I was getting mad*" (P15, B aged 8). The children are also subjected to a state of hopelessness by the death of their parents. One of them reported: "*I feel so helpless and no hope of ever being happy in life here in the street*" (P2, B aged 12). Another participant added similar information: "*My hopes were shattered when my parents died. I had great dreams of being a successful person like my parents but now I am here and so desperate*" (P 11, B aged 8). Due to unforeseen danger on the street, some

of them shared: *“I feel so much insecure and I see danger every night as I sleep in an open place where there is no one to take care of me like the way parents used to do when they were alive”* (P1, G aged 9). *“Every night I feel so unsecured here on the street and I wished I was at home where I could be safe”* (P13, B aged 15). The study found out that the children on the streets have no emotional support since members of the public view them as thieves. One of the participants revealed: *“There is no one who can even listen to me here on the street. Every time I long to speak to someone, they think I want to steal from them. It is really very sad for me”* (P15, B aged 8).

Neglect

Most of the participants revealed that they were neglected while they were at home with their parents or relatives whom they were staying with. Many participants shared that they were socially neglected by extended family members who had promised to take care of them. Some children tearfully narrated: *“My uncle and the wife used to deny me food every day”* (P15, B aged 8) *“My uncle and his family came to occupy our home and they sent us away”* (P3, G aged 10). Nearly all the children expressed their disappointments for lack of educational support. One of the participants painfully narrated: *“My uncle denied me to go to back to boarding school after my mom died”* (P11, B aged 8). Another participant also added: *“When church members came home to talk to my uncle that I go to school, he promised them to take me to boarding. But at night he beat me and told me to leave home and never come back home so I came to the street”* (P5, G aged 9). One of the participants tearfully narrated: *“When my mom died, my dad forced me to leave boarding primary school to go and study in public primary school and this made me feel very bitter because I wanted to do well in school and go to university ... but my father could not buy for me school uniform and I could go to school without breakfast”* (P1, B aged 14). The children were also neglected in terms of clothing and medical health when they lost their parents. Some of the participants tearfully narrated: *“One day my younger brother was very sick and when I asked my aunt to take him to hospital, she started beating me. They left him to continue being sick till he died”* (P5, G aged 9). Another participant also reported similar sentiments as follows: *“During Christmas time, my uncle bought clothes for all his children except me and he told me I should where whatever I have”* (P11, B aged 8). Some of the orphans felt that the people do not care about them after losing their parents. One of them shared: *“I used to cry every night after losing my mom and my aunt used to beat me and tell me I can die and follow my mom instead of disturbing them”* (P3, G aged 10). This shows that psychological well-being of the children is neglected by adults with assumptions that they are not supposed to grieve like adults after losing their parents.

Physical and Verbal Abuse

Parental absence due to death or divorce affects children's psychosocial well-being. The children always feel emotionally deprived of the comfort of being in the company of their biological parents. Some of the participants tearfully shared: *“My step-mom kept beating us and denying us food when our father was at work. One day she showed us poison for killing rats and told us if we do not follow our mom, she will kill us so we run to the street”* (P4, B aged 13). One of the participants also revealed: *“My step-dad used to beat me and he didn't like me at all especially when my mom bore another baby with him. He is not like my late dad who was so friendly”* (P14, B aged 12). This study discovered that some of the children escaped to the street due self-reported physical abuse and verbal abuse from the parents. This is supported by the following verbal quotes: *“My father used to beat us every day even when our mother was there with us and many times my mother could run away and leave us alone”* (P9, B aged 8). *“My mom is a single mom and we are 5 children at home. She was always unhappy and could start beating us and telling us to look for food”* (P7, G aged 16). Another participant also reported: *“My step-dad used to abusive with bad words while quarreling and since my mom was not ready to defend me I escaped from home”* (P6, B aged 14).

Life Experiences Associated with Street Life

In order to understand life experiences that the children face while living on the street, each participant was requested to answer one broad question as follows: *“Please tell me the kind of experiences you are going through while you are living here on the street.”* This question was supported by other questions that assisted the participant to remain on course. The children living on the street narrated that they never expected that life on the street to be worse than they were at home. While on the street, the children experienced fear and anxiety, physical and emotional abuse as well as exposure to substance use and abuse.

Fear and Anxiety

Fear was found to dominate the narrative of all the participants. The fear of being on the street was reflected in the following statements: *“I find the street so scary especially when I want to beg for food since I am not used begging”* (P8, B aged 9). The girls were scared of being raped by older boys and this is confirmed by one of them who shared: *“I fear being on the street because of the big boys who might rape me at night and I really hate them and I feel like running away to a safer place”* (P3, G aged 10). Some of the children feared that they might be attacked and killed while on the streets. This is confirmed by two participants of them who shared:

"I fear big boys because they carry knives and might attack me when they ask me for money and I do not have" (P11, B aged 8) *"I sometimes get scared when I imagined that I might be killed in the street and I wish I could just run away to a safer place"* (P10, G aged 13).

Emotional and Physical Abuse

Nearly all the participants pointed out that they were emotionally and physically abused on the streets often more than what they had experienced at their homes. This is depicted in the following: *"I was beaten nearly every day by big boys who came to the street earlier because they claimed I was invading on their territory"* (P1, B aged 14). Another participant also shared: *"The older boys could come to ask for sex and when I refuse, they start beating me and threatening to rape me if I continue resisting"* (P8, G aged 9). Some of them were emotionally distressed due to stressful way of living on the streets. One of the participants revealed: *"In most cases I sleep hungry here on the street when I fail to get food or money from begging or even stealing"* (P7, G aged 16). Another one also reported: *"Whenever I feel sick I get worried that I might die since no one is ready to help me get medication"* (P14, B aged 8). Some of the children expressed their disappointments about the way the members of the public are treating them. This is illustrated by the following verbal quotes from the children: *"In most cases, we are beaten by policemen and municipal officials and we are treated as if we are outcasts"* (P13, B aged 15). One of them revealed the way the members of the public are handling them as follows: *"I find that people are ready to beat us and whenever we try to beg them for food or money they utter abusive words calling us 'chokora' (meaning Scavengers) and others calling us thieves"* (P2, B aged 12).

Exposure to Substance Use and Abuse

The children stated that they were exposed to substance use and abuse by other children whom they found on the street. This is reflected by the following excerpts: *"At first when I was given glue to sniff, I felt the world was going round and I went and slept in the field. I only woke up when it was late at night and was feeling headache and hungry. But with more practice, I got used to"* (P6, B aged 14). Most of the participants have developed dependence to substances and they can do anything to get it as revealed by one of them: *"I find it difficult to do without sniffing glue and even when I do not have money to buy those substances I am forced to steal from people or even other street children"* (P13, B aged 15). The substances help them to get some temporary relieve from painful life experiences. One of the participants reported: *"After taking these substances, I cannot recall many things that disturbing me"* (P15, B aged 8). But the children are

aware of the dangers associated with the use and abuse of substance. One of them shared; *"My worry is that I get exposed to many dangers after taking substances because I tend to sleep anywhere even when it is raining"* (P3, G aged 10).

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that life experiences at home were too unbearable for the children and they seemed to have been at a boiling point while at living at their homes. The children were subjected to a lot of psychological distress, neglect, and physical and verbal abuse by the people they call immediate family members. The study established that these painful life experiences were perpetuated by the death of parents, parental divorce and various forms of parental mistreatment. Many of the participants self-reported various forms of verbal, emotional and physical abuse by their own parents and extended family members. Some of the orphans reported about that they experienced bad dreams about their death parents and some state of hopelessness and fear while others reported incidences of crying every time they are alone. From a psychological perspective, the results indicated that the children left their homes to live on the streets in order to escape psychological distress, neglect as well as physical and verbal abuse. The children are subjected to emotional turmoil by their own parents and this act can make them to escape a safer place which in this context is the street. In Burundi, more experience of childhood adversities among parents predicted perpetration of violence against children (Crombach and Bambonyé 2015) an indication that some parents are projecting their unhappiness to their innocent children and this can make them to escape to the streets. The findings of this study are similar to those which were reported in earlier studies (Human Rights Watch 2006; UNAIDS 2006; UNICEF 2004), as well as other independent researchers (for example, Bobic 2010; Cottrell and Finlayson 2001; Modi et al. 2016; Thornberry and Henry 2013). From the responses of the orphans, it was evident that they lacked emotional support to deal with grief after losing their parents. Coombe (2002) contented that children are highly traumatized by watching parents die and not being able to talk about it. This means that the absence of emotional support can be detrimental to children's psychological well-being since they do not access avenues of filtering out their trauma.

The children reported incidences of neglect in terms of emotional, educational and health supports. This kind of neglect was perpetuated by the death, divorce and lack of parenting skills as noted by the study. These findings concur with what earlier scholars documented that HIV/AIDS has many direct and indirect impacts on children's rights, ranging from the consequences of psychological impact of losing one or both parents, to reduce access to quality education and health

services (Coombe 2002; Cornia et al. 2002; Mon et al. 2013). Lack of adequate social support was also a constant feature emanating from the data collected from the children. Often, they did not receive sufficient educational and health care support from extended family members, and in some instances, they were actually discouraged from going to school. This further contributed to their feelings of hopelessness for the future, especially in terms of educational achievement. Such findings corroborate the work of other studies (for example, Ayaya and Esamai 2001; Chireshe et al. 2010; Mbozi et al. 2006; Moolla et al. 2008).

What is more challenging is the fact that such abuse and neglect of the children in their homes will always remain hidden (Feigelson 2011; UNICEF 2006, 2010) and people are not expected to share that due to some societal factors and norms. The societal norms are those norms where children are not expected to question the elders even if their rights are being infringed, for instance, where children are driven away from their homes after the death of their parents, and cases where children are not expected to shed tears when their parents die. These societal factors and social norms on one hand perpetuate violence and on the other promote positive social change (UNICEF 2008) within ecological systems. These social and cultural norms contribute in powerful ways to the presence of child violence, abuse and neglect (Landers 2013) unless these norms can be addressed. These findings support those of earlier scholars who did a study on street children in Egypt and contented that a high proportion of street children have been forcibly thrown out of the family home by uncaring or poverty-stricken family members (Hosny et al. 2007).

From the data collected, the researchers established that while these children are on the streets, the members of the public usually abuse them physically and they view as nobody's children but social isolates. They also reported that they are verbally abused by members of the public who called them '*chokora*' (scavengers). This is a cause of social discrimination of the children and this can even aggravate the problems they are experiencing on the streets. It was noted by Invernizzi (2001) that such form of discriminations of children living on the street can contribute to a social reaction towards them. This is because they are under public scrutiny, fall outside accepted social boundaries, and are perceived as an endangered or a dangerous group (Panter-Brick 2002). These findings confirm those of earlier researchers who pointed out that there is an association between orphanhood and child abuse (Nichols et al. 2014; Pillay 2016). These children living on the street are prone to all sorts of abuses by members of the public because they are viewed as delinquents, but this is a myth that the findings of this study disputed. This myth was also disputed by Dybic (2005) who pointed out that these children are pushed to the street life by factors such as abuse at home and material deprivation. Accounts of children

living on the street are often laced with a subtle threat that unless 'rehabilitated' they will seek to reduce their deprivation in more criminal ways (Veale et al. 2000). This is a presumption that needs to be reversed through public sensitization about life experiences that made the children to escape to the streets.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that life on the streets can be worse than the home experiences, especially in light of the fear and anxieties about personal safety experienced by the children. The girls feared being sexually abused by other children on the street and even members of the public. These findings concur with those of a study on street children in Sudan where the scholars documented that the threat of sexual abuse was commonplace and difficult to avoid, particularly for girls, most of whom had been raped by street boys, police, and/or other adult men multiple times (Kudrati et al. 2008). The children living on the streets commonly use and abuse substances which they believe can help them to cope with the difficult life on the streets. At the same time their lives are also in danger as they have to escape from other people on the streets who attack them when they are intoxicated or when these children need to steal from others to feed their drug habits. These findings confirm what was observed in previous studies about dangers of substance use and abuse by children living on the street (for example, Morakinyo and Odejide 2003; Othieno and Obondo 2000; Palen et al. 2006). According to Panter-Brick (2002), previous interventions focusing on rescuing children from the streets by placing them back at school or with the family have generally not provided lasting solutions because they tend to ignore children's own views. But for this study, the researchers felt that plight of children on dangers of substances and abuse that they need instant considerations where they can be provided with rehabilitation and psychological counseling services.

Although there are similarities of the findings with previous studies about children living on the streets, this study however found out that children living on streets are not necessarily delinquents as generally perceived by the public. These are children whose rights have been denied and their dreams for a successful future have been shattered due to failure from the supportive ecological niches. The untimely death of parents or parental divorce, as well as dysfunctional family upbringing, should be not be seen as excuses to subject children to unbearable life experiences at home. The study noted that society as a whole has failed in its core responsibility of protecting the rights of its members especially the children who meet misfortune at their tender age. If the children living on streets are to be assisted to live a normal life, then all relevant stakeholders in society must rise above their current standards and ensure the holistic well-being of such children within ecological systems (the family, the school and the community).

Implications

From the findings of this study, it is evident that most of the children living on streets have been subjected to various forms of abuse and neglect and these situations are more complex since they are rooted within unhealthy relationships within the microsystem. From the data collected, it has emerged that children living on the streets are quite traumatized about the experiences at homes and the same trauma is still being precipitated by the unfriendly environment on the streets. Hence, urgent interventions are needed to assist those children living on the streets to normalize their lives, as well as interventions that can alleviate the problems within the family that push children to the streets. Such interventions should focus attention on the resilience of such children who manage to negotiate extremely difficult situations (Panter-Brick 2002). Such interventions may include poverty alleviation within the family, training parents on parenting skills and sensitizing the society on children's rights. The children who are already living on the streets can be provided with temporary shelters like in children's homes or rehabilitation centres. While in such alternative accommodation, the children can be provided with psychosocial services, such as counseling and life skills, in order for them to overcome the traumas of life and be able to live a responsible life thereafter. The study also noted that children together with their families need holistic empowerment. This empowerment should assist them to gain skills and knowledge necessary to succeed, feel valued and included, and develop a sense of purpose and confidence in their ability to succeed, accomplish their dreams, and affect their world (Bryan and Henry 2008). In a study in Kenya, scholars suggested that there is a need to identify households with early school dropout, and develop referral, support and accountability systems for such families in order to reduce street-migration of children (Goodman et al. 2017). This study, therefore, suggests that a close follow-up of children in school should be monitored to check those who might have dropped out of school and immediate action should be taken by the local government leadership. The children who are already on the street need interventions that are geared towards behaviour change and psychological transformation. This can be achieved by engaging early childhood professionals like child counselors who can be able to help the children cope with traumatizing life experiences.

The families need to become more empowered in their exosystemic relations (Bronfenbrenner 2005) in order to ensure future security for their children. The dysfunctional families need to be equipped with parenting skills so that children can be protected from abuse and neglect. This can be achieved by engaging community social workers who can provide such trainings within the community or by doing home visitations of affected families. Landers (2013) argue that social workers should have the capacity to identify families and children at

risk, and to conduct home visits to provide direct support or refer them to services to meet their needs. The community also needs to be involved in the process of rehabilitation and repatriation of such children. This is due to the fact that such families are not outside all other ecological niches, as stated by Bronfenbrenner (2005), but they are enmeshed within the community. Within the ecological systems, protective interventions should address the interplay between the child living on the streets with his/her family, local community and the broader societal context. Therefore, interventions should aim at creating a safe and stable environment within the family, as well as enhancing healthy societal norms nurturing relationships and environments.

Conclusion

The findings in this study indicate that children leaving their homes to live on streets actually jumped from the 'boiling pot' into the 'hot fire'. The study realized that while these children were still at their homes they had painful life experiences which were perpetuated by the death of their parents, parental divorce and parental mistreatment. At their homes, the children experienced psychologically distressed, they felt neglected and they were physically and verbally abused by their parents and extended family members. Such painful life experiences at home forced the children to escape to the street, which to their dismay was worse than being at their home. While on the street, the children experienced fear and anxiety, physical and emotional abuse, as well as exposure to substance use and abuse.

This study had some limitations, such as the small size of participants, it was purely qualitative, and it was carried out in only one town in Kenya. Despite these limitations, the qualitative data provided a vivid description of the children's life experiences both in their homes and on the streets. The findings of this study may not necessarily be limited to children in this study since there are children across the globe living on streets and may have similar life experiences. The researchers recommend appropriate programs to empower early child professionals with the knowledge and skills of rehabilitating children living on streets. This should be extended to families where individuals are trained on parenting skills and possibly protective measures that contribute to children's proper developmental processes. Since the children living on the street are a global phenomenon, this study recommends that advocacy campaigns are necessary to sensitize members of the public on the rights of such children. Behavioural programs are necessary where such children who have been on the streets for long can be offered several counseling sessions and can be gradually introduced to community life before re-integrating to their families.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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