Shelter and Young People Living on the Streets in Three African Cities
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INTRODUCTION

For young people living on the streets of Harare, the absence of safe, affordable shelter impacts on every aspect of their lives, including their ability to work; be healthy; cook affordable food; keep basic possessions such as utensils, underwear and soap; protect themselves and their children from crime, the elements and insects; as well as preserve their emotional wellbeing and sense of self. They yearn for a future with an element of certainty; they need to feel safe, comfortable, secure, and stable, in their lives.

This briefing paper provides an insight into the consequences of homelessness on the physical and emotional wellbeing of young people who sleep on the streets of Harare, the strategies they employ to secure some form of shelter and security, and the challenges they face. It reports the findings from six focus groups held in 2013 on the theme of shelter involving 66 street children and youth aged 14-20. As part of participatory involvement in analysis of Growing up on the Streets data, this Harare addendum also reflects an additional analysis workshop held with participants in 2018. For more information please see our full briefing paper on Shelter.

KEY POINTS

- Shelter is fundamental to all aspects of the wellbeing and resilience of young people living on the streets of Harare, such as accessing food, making a living, maintaining health, feeling safe, stable and protected.
- Children and youth in Harare use a variety of places as shelter, including alleyways, abandoned buildings, graveyards, railways wagons, shop verandas, parks, lodges, movie houses and rented group rooms.
- Failure to find a safe place to sleep exposes young people to both physical and sexual violence, ill health, conflict with shop owners, and police beatings or arrests as they are suspected of crimes.
- Girls exchange sex for shelter, risking unwanted pregnancy, violence and sexually transmitted diseases. Accessing shelter is more difficult for girls who are pregnant or who are caring for babies.
- Failure to obtain shelter means street children and youth have nowhere to secure their possessions, limiting their ability to accumulate assets for the future.
DEFINING SHELTER

Shelter is as a safe place to sleep at night one that offers protection from violence and somewhere to keep belongings. It’s a place to sleep peacefully, protected from the rains, the cold and mosquitoes, and security from being chased before you have had enough rest.

For girls, shelter has to offer protection from the brutality of police and soldiers, sexual abuse from others living on the street and members of the public.

With sporadic and inconsistent income, street children and youth have limited options for shelter. Alleyways, shop verandas, abandoned or incomplete buildings, electric substations, underground man holes, graveyards, abandoned railway wagons, the top of toilet buildings, parked cars, halls where films are showing, makeshift shelters along Mukusvi River, and flower beds in public parks are all forms of shelter. One male participant in Harare described shelter as: “a cage-mesh, squatter house in any alleyway. That is what we call shelter of our own, because we built it in a way that we can be covered from weather conditions” (Harare group 1). Sometimes when it is warm, some children and youth will just sleep in the open or under benches. One participant “used to sleep under the benches but I stopped the day I wake up when someone had urinated on me” (group 6). When they can afford it, a small number of young people rent a space – either a shack or a shared room on a weekly basis, a common practice among girls who pay $10 a day to stay in a group room. Some go to Mbare and pay to enter a movie house in order to sleep in a safe place.

ABILITY TO SLEEP, DISTURBANCE, RISK

Young people need a quiet place to sleep after a day’s activities; however, without shelter they have insufficient sleep as they are woken up, often in a violent manner.

Most sleep from “around seven o’clock or eight o’clock in the evening and wake up at four o’clock in the morning” (group 1). Due to shortage of places to sleep, they use the locations described above, which can bring them into conflict with the police, municipal guards and members of the public. In Harare they are given the derogatory name “magunduru”, meaning people who can sleep anywhere, even where he or she is not permitted. The children are constantly harassed by the police for sleeping on unauthorised places and are readily suspected whenever there is a robbery or theft.

Girls risk sexual abuse when they sleep in open spaces so in order to raise the daily rentals for a group room, girls exchange sex for shelter or engage in prostitution, thereby exposing themselves to sexually transmitted infections and sexual violence from male clients. Some older street girls, desperate to raise money for daily rentals, have joined gangs to extort money from unsuspecting male clients further increasing their vulnerability to arrest.

Those sleeping in public places, such as shop verandas and alleyways, are often disturbed by owners, thereby depriving them of enough time to sleep. They wake up tired, lethargic and irritable affecting their relationships with their peers and members of the public. Lack of sleep affect street children and youth’s ability to work and has serious consequences on their health.
EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

Most children sleep together in alleyways; a “base” that gives them an identity, but not necessarily protection from the authorities. One participant describes violence at the hands of the police: “I was beaten with the back of a gun in the head and all my airtime money was taken” (group 5). The alleyway gives an easy escape route when cornered by the police. One child reinforced this point: “the alleyway is good and not good, because sleeping in there you sleep like a rabbit...you sleep while at the same time you keep an ear out […] because of soldiers you should sleep with one eye open” (group 5).

SHELTER AND WEATHER

Street children and youth try to find a warm and dry place so that they can sleep. Sleeping in open spaces leaves young people vulnerable to insect bites (mosquitoes and lice); bad weather makes them susceptible to flu. Some may light a fire to stay warm, but fear attracting the attention of the police. Rain water soaks through the blankets and cardboard boxes that young people use for bedding, so sleeping becomes very difficult. Some children and youth resort to using abandoned or incomplete buildings to avoid the cold and rains; one of the network members who was part of this research was electrocuted while using an electric substation as shelter. Abandoned and incomplete buildings can be dangerous; children have reported being robbed and sexually abused there and only use them due to desperation.

SAVINGS AND POSSESSIONS

Due to theft, insecurity and the destabilising influence of the authorities, maintaining even basic possessions, such as food and underwear is a constant challenge. Young people go to great lengths to hide their possessions every day in drains, trees or under railway platforms. On the streets of Harare, possessions are either carried in person or hidden as children and youth expect their belongings to be stolen if left at their bases. Younger children are often bullied by older boys into surrendering their money or possessions, leaving only the tattered clothes they are wearing. One male participant commented: “I am a moving wardrobe; all I have moves with me” (Analysis workshop, 2018). Music players (devices) are valuable, because they can easily be converted to cash in times of need. Other possessions can be in the form of wares for sale like music CDs, movies, phone chargers and cables.

PROSTITUTION, RELATIONSHIPS AND BABIES

The experience of girls in Harare focuses on sexual activity both as a means of accessing ‘safe’ shelter and the fear of abuse in the form of rape or sexualised assault (also a fear mentioned by boys). Gang rape is a reality for girls in Harare and is a primary reason to stay with boys on the streets or with friends. Some older girls extort money from male shoppers by falsely accusing them (males) of having had sex with them and thereafter refusing to pay. Sometimes the girls succeed in extorting money as most men try to avoid the embarrassment but this strategy can lead to arguments and the police can be called.
Besides sex work and transactional relationships, some boys and girls form family bonds on the streets. There are a number of street boys and girls who have had babies together. Depending on individual's earnings some male youths opt to work hard (on the streets) and rent rooms (in Epworth) for their female partners and babies. However, these arrangements seem to work only until the baby is weaned off the mother’s milk. After that, the girls often leave the street boyfriends for other capable suitors who can provide and give stable accommodation.

LOCAL ACTION

There is a lack of local and national policy or programmes that address the needs of street children and youth, particularly around shelter which impacts upon all aspects of their lives.

Government and other actors must adopt a child rights based approach in assisting street children and youth, in line with recent United Nations authoritative guidance.

Finally, recognising the rights of street children and youth and their need for assistance cannot be left to the government alone. Guided by multisector policy and a child rights approach, NGOs, churches and society as a whole also have a role to play.