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Examining the Factors Influencing the Emergence of Street Children: A Systematic Review Approach

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Abstract

Objective: The importance of paying attention to the presence of children on the streets has become evident for many researchers and policymakers in various countries. Despite the presentation of multiple models in different countries, a comprehensive practical model for examining the factors affecting the emergence of street children in our society has not been conducted. This study aims to identify and examine the most important and influential factors contributing to the presence of children on the streets.

Methodology: This research is exploratory in terms of its objective and applied in terms of its use. Using a systematic review method, 81 related studies from 2001 to 2023 were identified, and 51 articles were selected as the sample for review.

Findings: The findings indicated that the emergence and prevalence of the street children phenomenon in different societies result from four fundamental factors, which include economic, social, familial, and individual factors.

Research Results: Based on this study, to reduce the presence of children on the streets, attention must be paid to the four essential factors, each of which are: economic, social, familial, and individual factors.

Keywords: Street Children; Streets

Introduction

Street children are a segment of human capital, and their physical and mental health can significantly impact the health of society. These children face health issues, challenges in maintaining mental health, psychological problems, and lack of academic progress (Salmani & Hajiani, 2013, p. 55). The increasing number of street-working children is a newly emerging phenomenon and a concern for today's society (Shakouri, 2014, p. 34). Currently, 168 million children worldwide are involved in child labor (Shafie Abadi et al., 2023, p. 4). Childhood plays a vital role in human growth and flourishing, making children particularly vulnerable physically and psychologically during this period. It is a time for

fundamental learning and acquiring essential skills for building the future. In the case of street children, not only is there a lack of proper and fundamental groundwork for their future, but these children also spend the most valuable and productive hours of their lives on the streets, which serve as their home. Instead of providing psychological and physical security, this environment fosters various challenges and risks, such as addiction, abuse, theft, abortion, HIV infection, drug trafficking, exploitation, and other forms of abuse (Shalchi & Mirzaabadi, 2015). In recent years, many developing countries have witnessed an overwhelming emergence of street children, highlighting the urgent need to address their situation. The Industrial Revolution in the 18th century initiated a migration of rural populations to cities in search of factory work and better income. This led to the marginalization of some community members who remained unemployed or could not find suitable income due to family obligations and a lack of skills. Consequently, the number of homeless and begging children in major cities increased unprecedentedly (Azimzadeh Ardebili, 2003, p. 102).

The term "street children" was first used by Myho in England in 1815 and became common in the U.S. in 1979. Various definitions have been provided based on factors such as circumstances, age, geographic location, behavior, and family relations (Shalchi & Mirzaabadi, 2015, p. 203). What generally distinguishes street-working children from other children is that, for various reasons, they spend more time in the streets of large, modern cities—environments that are unsafe and chaotic for children—rather than being with their families or attending school (Prott et al., 2006; Imani & Narsisian, 2011, p. 8). To address and mitigate social issues, including the problem of street children, and to meet community needs based on scientific findings, it is essential to review existing research on social problems and utilize their results in planning. Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of studies that have received less attention is also crucial. Understanding street children through research that examines their living conditions and the reasons for their presence in the streets can guide policymakers and planners in preventing harm to these children and supporting them. Since no comprehensive study on street children has been conducted in Afghanistan so far, this study aims to collect and categorize research evidence regarding street children and to identify the reasons for their presence on the streets based on scientific evidence. By documenting this information, the study seeks to apply these findings effectively. This paper aims to answer the following question regarding the issue of street children:

What fundamental factors should be considered to reduce the presence of children in the streets?

Methods

Study Type and Data Collection Method

This study was conducted using a systematic review approach. Systematic reviews provide a concise and effective summary of existing research on a specific topic. Unlike traditional methods, they follow strict and rigorous guidelines similar to those used in primary research (Rajab Nejad et al., 2006; Vamqi et al., 2010).

Source Search

In this phase, a systematic search was conducted for published articles across reputable databases and websites to identify credible and relevant documents. The search included databases such as Google Scholar, Ensani.ir, SID, Noormags, the Journal of Social Issues in Iran, the Applied Sociology Database, the Journal of Social Work Research, the Razih Medical Sciences Journal, the Cultural Management Journal, the Quarterly Journal of Social-Cultural Development Studies, the Quarterly Journal of Welfare Planning and Social Development, the Social Studies and Research Database in Iran, the Urban Sociological Studies Database, the Scientific-Research Journal of Social Welfare, the Quarterly Journal of Economic Studies and Policies, the Rahpooyeh Communication and Culture Quarterly, and the Specialized Scientific Journal of Modern Research in Psychology. Keywords such as "street children,"

"child labor," "street kids," "homeless children," "begging children," along with their English equivalents ("Street Children," "Street Kids," "Child Labor") were used in the search.

Study Evaluation

Initially, 81 article titles were collected based on the keywords. After reviewing all selected articles, approximately 51 were chosen for inclusion. The criteria for including studies focused on various types of research related to street children and the factors contributing to their situations from 2001 to 2023.

Street children are referred to as children who, due to economic, social, political, cultural, and other disarray, are deprived of education, health, nutrition, security, play, and other rights, and are compelled to live and work in streets, parks, stores, farms, ports, and so on (Ramazan Khani et al., 2016).

Street children have specific terms in different countries; in England, they are called "Street Children," in the United States, "street kids," and in Italy and Somalia, they are referred to as "Children of tunnels" (Azimzadeh Ardabili, 2003, p. 102).

The issue of street children is recognized as a relatively new social problem that is visibly present in all societies. A street child is a child who spends most of their time on the street; the street is their source of livelihood, and they are not adequately or properly cared for (Zarei, 2001; Najm Iraqi, 2003; Karnik, 2003; Jafari and Qamarani, 2004, p. 3). These children have lost their family ties either completely or partially and engage in various activities for survival on the streets.

According to UNICEF, street children are those who are forced to work or live on the streets in large cities to sustain their lives. UNICEF categorizes street children into four groups:

- 1. Children whose only concern is survival and who live on the streets.
- 2. Children who are separated from their families and live in various places such as shelters or abandoned buildings, or with friends.
- 3. Children who maintain contact with their families but, due to poverty and large family size, spend most days and some nights on the streets.
- 4. Children who are under the care of institutions, having escaped homelessness, or who are detained in reform centers due to committing offenses (Azimzadeh Ardabili, 2003, p. 104).

In another classification, street children are divided into three categories:

- 1. Child in the street: These children work only on the street and return home to their families at night.
- 2. Street child: These children either have no family, have been abandoned by their families, or have run away from home and live on the street.
- 3. Family street child: These children live on the streets with their families (Gholami and Nabiallah, 2020, p. 502; Vamqi, 2005, p. 178).

The issue of street children is considered a pressing global problem because children and adolescents are the future builders of a country and the driving force of its economy. Therefore, any threat to them poses a threat to the future of a nation. The phenomenon of street working children can have severe consequences, as unknown individuals and sometimes anonymous groups exploit these children for profit. The presence of children on the streets signifies the potential for various problems and harms, as children are both vulnerable and at risk due to their specific circumstances. In other words, while they

may become victims of unknown individuals, they can also, through these same individuals, become perpetrators themselves, distributing or trafficking substances and items to others (Moghadam, Moltafat, and Hazbavi, 2022, p. 4).

Street children face not only physical harm but also irreversible non-physical harm. For instance, they often experience psychological weaknesses that hinder their access to education and affect their abilities in certain areas, such as basic calculations. Their emotional development is disrupted due to working in harsh psychological conditions, leading to a lack of self-esteem, family attachment, and feelings of love. These children also suffer from various forms of depression and anxiety that are disproportionate to their age (Ibid, p. 3).

In a study by Simber, Khanzadeh, and Abolqasem (2019), the psychological and behavioral characteristics of street working children were examined using a causal-comparative method in a sample of 100 street working children and regular children aged 10 to 12 years. The results indicated that street working children had significantly more emotional and behavioral problems compared to their peers and exhibited lower hope for the future (Sabzi Khushnami et al., 2019, p. 79).

Today, there is a common viewpoint that child labor is deeply rooted in poverty; however, the causes of child labor appear to be complex and should not be oversimplified. The multiple reasons for child labor are related to the various cultures and contexts in which children live, making it misleading to generalize the causes. Poverty is indeed the most significant factor that drives children into the labor environment, as the income generated from child labor is essential for their own and their families' survival.

While poverty plays a fundamental role in the emergence of child labor issues, it is not the sole factor. Prevailing beliefs and local customs also play an important role. For instance, the belief that hard work toughens a child and is essential for their growth contributes to this phenomenon.

Studies conducted on the phenomenon of street children have identified various factors that lead to their presence on the streets.

Zarei Zadeh (2013) writes that economic factors such as poverty, injustice, unemployment, significant social class gaps, and unequal distribution of wealth can influence the presence of children on the streets. Many experts believe that the primary reason for children being on the streets is to work and earn income, as their families do not have sufficient income to meet their daily needs (Lask, as cited in Afshani et al., 2012).

Social and cultural factors, including structural composition and population growth, migration, war, changes in social and cultural values, generational differences in attitudes, and discriminatory beliefs—such as viewing children as a source of income and the lack of institutional support for them—also contribute to this issue.

Family factors include large, crowded, and high-risk families with backgrounds of addiction, parents' lack of awareness regarding appropriate needs, and more (Zarei Zadeh, 2013). From the perspective of many researchers, the causes of children becoming street children are rooted in family harm and poverty. Numerous studies in many developing countries indicate that dysfunctional relationships and economic pressures within families play a decisive role in children leaving home. Many street children come from families where they experience abuse and neglect. A substantial amount of research shows that these familial harms often stem from the family's poverty (Vamqi et al., 2013).

Donald Stewart believes that the lack or loss of adequate relationships with one parent is one of the greatest psychological challenges for street children (Soleimani and Haji'ani, 2013, p. 55).

Ghasemi (2018) points to individual or psychological factors, including personality traits, mental abilities, and their coping skills with life challenges, the crisis of puberty, and its effects (Ghasemi, 2018, pp. 92-93).

Vamqi et al. (2014) identified the following factors as the most important reasons for children becoming street children:

- 1. Lack of Educational Facilities: This is one of the most significant causes of child labor. Many communities lack adequate educational resources, and even where schools exist, education may not be viewed as a suitable alternative to work by the child or their family.
- 2. Child Labor to Support the Family: According to this theory, in developing societies, many children work to support their families. Most children work because their families need their help, either through the income they earn or by assisting with household tasks. Since children see themselves as part of the family, they often find it reasonable to help, especially when the survival of the family depends on their assistance. Studies in Morocco and Indonesia have shown that many children feel positively about providing financial support to their families. In a study in Brazil, children reported working to help their mothers and giving a significant portion of their income to the family.
- 3. Child Labor as a Means of Self-Actualization: The main reason for this theory is that many children, even if not compelled to work, want to engage in it. Even when poverty is not an issue and children are not forced to work, some express a desire to do so. Some children believe that work is a good way to learn and that it will help them grow into competent and successful adults.
- 4. Independence: This is another factor motivating child labor. Independence varies across cultures and has both psychological and economic aspects. The psychological aspect of independence is the child's need to earn pocket money without relying on their parents. Economic independence is more commonly observed in children from poorer countries, where they seek ways to escape poverty, making it essential for them to earn money for themselves.
- 5. Child Labor as a Consequence of Family Dynamics: According to this theory, child labor results from the family's inability to make decisions or manage relationships. It reflects the family's misjudgment of realities or strategic thinking regarding the best ways to confront these realities. For example, many parents who allow their children to work instead of studying overlook the importance of education. Additionally, child labor can result from the breakdown of family values, leading parents to neglect their supportive roles.
- 6. Parental Education and Occupation: Another significant factor in child labor is the education level of parents. More educated parents, especially mothers, are less likely to allow their children to work.
- 7. Child Labor as a Consequence of Poverty: This is one of the most common theories explaining child labor. According to reports from the International Labour Organization, child labor may account for about 20% of family income. In poor families, where most income is spent on food, the earnings of children are a serious concern (Vamqi et al., 2014, pp. 394-397).

Azimzadeh Ardebili (2003), citing Barbara Baring in her research studies, categorizes the factors influencing the emergence and reinforcement of this social phenomenon into four groups:

1. Root Social Factors: Such as economic problems and poverty, rapid population growth, unemployment, and natural disasters like floods and earthquakes.

- 2. **Contextual Social Factors**: Such as the unfair distribution of resources and services and poor working conditions.
- 3. **Direct Factors**: Such as large and impoverished families, high divorce rates, addiction, and physical and psychological abuse within families, as well as a lack of attention and affection in the family and low parental education levels.
- 4. Other Factors: Such as children's contributions to family livelihood, family rejection of children, and leaving home due to family abuse (Azimzadeh Ardebili, 2003, p. 105).

Sediqi (2023) and Azimzadeh Ardebili (2003) have pointed out the following factors in their research:

- Unequal Distribution of Wealth: There is a severe class divide in society.
- Lack of Government Policies: There is inadequate government policy regarding population control.
- Erosion of Values and Traditions: There is indifference towards child labor.
- Migration from Small Cities to Large Cities: This is often due to natural disasters, poverty, and lack of job opportunities.
- International Migration:
- High Educational Costs:
- Lack of Government Participation: There is insufficient collaboration between the government and the public in controlling and addressing the phenomenon of street children.
- Illiteracy and Low Education Levels of Parents:
- Parental Indifference or Misguided Strictness:
- Large Family Size:
- Parental Addiction or Separation:
- Behavioral Conflicts Within Families:
- Lack of Care Facilities After Leaving Institutions: (Sediqi, 2023, p. 66; Azimzadeh Ardebili, 2003, p. 109).

Among other factors contributing to the presence of children in the streets are the high costs of living, which is a significant issue for street children, leading them to feel the need to work as a source of income for themselves and often as financial support for their families. It is important to note that the presence of these children on the streets is frequently due to family requests and occurs without the child's consent or decision. Entertainment and freedom, contrary to initial assumptions about the reasons for children's presence on the streets, are cited by 6% of these individuals as the most important reasons for being on the streets. Repeated mentions of terms like fun, freedom, and the idea that home is merely a place of limitations reflect the choice of the street as a space for entertainment and leisure by these individuals (Gholami and Nabiollah, 2020, p. 507).

Afshani et al. (2012), citing Fall, note that the reasons for children leaving home can be divided into two categories: attracting factors and repelling factors. Attracting factors include the excitement and allure of life in big cities, hope for improved living standards, financial security, and independence. Repelling factors consist of natural population growth exceeding manageable capacity, global

urbanization trends, high living costs, the need for additional income, and the fragmentation of traditional family structures (Afshani et al., 2012, p. 90).

A study involving over a thousand street children conducted by NGOs in Zambia revealed that more than 90% of the fathers of these children are unemployed, and the children's lives on the streets are closely linked to their family's poverty (Lumba, 2002; Vameqi et al., 2011, p. 139).

A rapid assessment of street children in Cairo and Alexandria categorizes the factors leading to street life into two groups: indirect causes that facilitate the pathway to street life without directly causing children to end up there, and direct causes that lead children into the streets, which children themselves often identify as the reasons for their situation. According to this study's findings, low income and low education levels in families are indirect causes of children becoming street children, as 98% of the study samples belong to low-income families, and 66% come from families with low educational attainment. Other indirect causes include family disintegration, children dropping out of school, family dynamics, unplanned migrations, and the diminishing role of families in addressing children's problems, particularly in urban areas. Among the direct causes, the influence of friends is identified as the most significant factor leading children to leave home and start street life (World Food Program, 2001; Vameqi, 2014, p. 140).

Analysis

Based on various studies regarding the presence of children in the streets, several factors have been identified, with the most important ones being as follows:

Economic Factors: One of the most significant factors mentioned in the article is economic poverty. Poor families, unable to meet basic life needs, force their children to work in the streets. This issue is particularly evident in developing countries. Many experts consider the primary reason for children being on the streets to be the need to earn income for daily necessities (Yazdani and Yazarlu, 2022; Onagh et al., 2023, p. 72; Moltaft et al., 2020, p. 33; Arshi et al., 2021, p. 828).

Social Factors: Numerous studies have shown that lack of access to social services and education plays a significant role in increasing the number of street children. Children who are unable to attend school due to social conditions turn to the streets to help support their families. Population growth, migration, changes in social and cultural values, generational differences in attitudes and beliefs, unemployment, and natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes are also social factors contributing to the presence of children on the streets (Mirzaei et al., 2023, p. 87; Qasemi et al., 2018, p. 89; Vameqi et al., 2013, p. 37; Vameqi et al., 2014, p. 392; Kashavarz-Haddad et al., 2013, p. 55).

Family Factors: Family factors include large, overcrowded families and a lack of parental attention to children, which can significantly contribute to the presence of children on the streets. A substantial amount of research indicates that family issues, parental discord, divorce, family poverty, illiteracy and low education of parents, behavioral conflicts within families, migration from rural areas to cities, and physical and psychological abuse within families, as well as a lack of attention and affection, are all influential factors in the presence of children on the streets. Multiple studies show that the jobs of the fathers of many street children often include street vending, carrying goods, labor, and driving (Ahmadi-Khaniha et al., 2002, p. 3; Mazloomzadeh et al., 2023, p. 55; Shahreki and Qaderi, 2015, p. 81; Najafpour, 2014; Qaidari and Yar-Ahmadi, 2020, p. 213; Shahabadi et al., 2009, p. 29).

Individual Factors: Individual characteristics of children, their mental abilities, their capacity to cope with life's challenges, puberty crises, low self-confidence, resilience, traumatic experiences, psychological disorders, street friends, and academic difficulties are among the individual factors affecting the presence of children on the streets (Eqlima, 2007, p. 144; Afshani et al., 2012, p. 89; Gholami and Nabiollah, 2020, p. 507; Roshanpour et al., 2022, p. 149).

Although various studies have pointed to multiple factors contributing to the presence of children on the streets, the most significant factors that explain the presence of most street children can be categorized into four fundamental areas: economic, social, familial, and individual.

Conclusion

The issue of street children is a well-recognized social problem that is visibly present in all societies. A street child is one who spends all or part of their time on the streets, where the street becomes their source of livelihood, and they are not adequately cared for. These children lose their familial ties, either completely or partially, and engage in various activities to survive in the streets.

Multiple factors contribute to the presence of children on the streets, with the most significant being economic, social, cultural, familial, individual, and educational factors. Economic factors include poverty, injustice, unemployment, significant disparities in social classes, and the unequal distribution of wealth. Poor families, unable to meet basic needs, often force their children to work on the streets, which, for some, replaces the home. This home, rather than providing psychological and physical safety, can become a source of various challenges and harms, such as addiction, theft, drug trafficking, exploitation, and exposure to various health issues.

Important social factors include a lack of access to social and educational services, population growth, migration, changes in social and cultural values, generational differences in attitudes, unemployment, and natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes.

Key familial factors consist of large, overcrowded families, neglectful parenting, family dysfunction, parental discord, divorce, family poverty, parental illiteracy, behavioral conflicts within the family, migration from rural areas to urban centers, physical and psychological abuse, and a lack of emotional support within families.

Individual characteristics of children, such as their mental capabilities, coping skills, puberty challenges, low self-esteem, resilience, traumatic experiences, psychological disorders, friendships with other street children, and academic difficulties, also significantly influence their presence on the streets.

Street children represent a growing challenge in most modern societies, highlighting the urgent need for increased attention to this issue. These children are the future of any nation and the driving force of its economy. Therefore, any threat to them poses a risk to the country's future. The phenomenon of street working children can lead to severe consequences, as unknown individuals and sometimes organized groups exploit these children for profit. Their presence on the streets signals a range of issues and vulnerabilities, as children are particularly susceptible to harm. They are not only victims of exploitation but can also inadvertently cause harm to others. Understanding the factors contributing to the phenomenon of street children can help us prevent various problems for these vulnerable individuals and the challenges they may pose to society, enabling us to devise effective solutions to address this pressing issue.

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