"INVISIBLE" STREET CHILDREN - EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND / OR SOCIAL PROBLEM

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Abstract

This paper uses available literature to theorize, analyse and define the syntagma of "street children" and describes the descriptors of implication of the namesake theme. Numerous research, both psychosocial and other perspectives, point to the increase in the number of *street children* that are becoming a growing global problem, especially concerning modern emigration flows during the so-called emigration crisis in Europe, but also in the world. The problem requires the finding of starting point of understanding who street children are, as well as factors that conditioned the existence of this phenomenon. Thus, this paper can be seen also as a possibility of potential prevention since once assimilated children on the street have a hard time becoming equal participants in society with equal opportunities. However, the problem of street children could also be observed as an unused social capital since these street children withstand the harsh reality, succeeding in assimilation often imposed upon them in their struggle for survival. Researches shows an increase in sexually transmitted disease such as AIDS among street children, as well as increase in hepatitis, prostitution and beggary. Despite the fact that street children represent a significant challenge to social workers, physicians, educationalists and other experts, majority of street children are literate, know basic calculations and poses exceptional diction despite the fact they never receiving school education. In conclusion, the paper tries to present global and national perspectives of street children.

Keywords: Street children, education, social capital, prevention.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of street children is found in the media and in scientific and professional literature under the terms "street children", "children in the street", "children of the street", "children left to the street", "street-connected children", "street-connected youth", "runaways", "community children", "rough sleepers", but are lately also referred more and more as "invisible children" (Gaon-Grujić, 2014), often if they do not have their first and last names – i.e. birth certificate, or "children on the move". Many scientists have tried to make these expressions operational, but it is important to note that these terms, as well as the street children's perspectives, differ from city to city, from state to state and from continent to continent. However, regardless of whether we are examining economically poorer or richer countries, there is no country that does not experience street children phenomenon, so the question arises as to how children become street children and how to maximally prevent this burning problem, when it comes to contemporary migrant flows, and redirect it to potential social capital. The fact that street children problem is more and more present is attested by the *International Day for Street Children*, which is marked on April 12th. The *International Day for Street Children* was established in 2011 by the *Consortium for Street Children*, a leading international network dedicated to advocating for the rights of children living and / or working in the streets around the world. However, in order to talk about street children, it is necessary to know first what this term determines, since some authors do not identify in their works street children with children of the street and children in the street. Moreover, the term "invisible children" is increasingly used in the media. The aim of this paper is to present this growing global problem through national and global perspectives. The paper tries to sum up the reasons for this phenomenon, bearing in mind that each state has its own specifics. As street children are mostly semi-literate and are not in contact with their own families, but still manage to settle down in a unique way of living, which is surprising and at the same time requires closer observation and explanation. Creating subculture and substitute families, a type of assimilation and independence, acquiring basic knowledge in mathematics and street discourse, necessary for survival, are topics also discussed in this paper.

2. Global and national perspectives of street children

According to the UNICEF's definition and definition of numerous organizations of similar type, street children are defined unambiguously as the so-called *market children*, i.e. children who work in city streets and squares, selling or begging, but still living with their families, and as *homeless street children*, i.e. children who work, live and sleep in the streets and usually have no contact with their families. UNICEF's definition is close to the later, but street children is a term that includes children who spend most of their time in the streets fighting for their own existence, but occasionally return home, as well as children living in the street with their parents (UNICEF, n.d.). But street children are children who are "migrating", regardless of whether it is within the state, between cantons, between cities, or between states. These children are on the move and are potentially at risk of inadequate care, economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect, etc. These children are forced to do certain things. These are children who mainly beg. They are forced to do this (Bilić, 2014). These children are not able to become emotionally, socially and economically independent adults. The *Council of Europe* in the *Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice* classified street children under the category of "vulnerable children", together with children of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, children with disabilities, homeless children, Roma children and children in accommodation facilities (Council of Europe, 201 4, p.18). Horvat et al. (2012) in a case studies on at risk groups emphasize the Roma, the youth in foster families, the youth with behavioural problems, refugees, the unemployed youth and the youth with disabilities, and the youth from children's and educational centres. In future perspectives, any individual in these social groups can become a street child. Particularly at risk are the Roma and the youth with behavioural problems characterized by deviations in different areas of functioning of children and the youth, from relationships with their relatives and the social environment through difficulties regarding nutrition, sleeping and reluctant activities, lying, theft, use and resale of illegal psychoactive means, running away from home and vagrancy, aggression, violence, burglary, arson, rape and other extreme forms of asocial, antisocial and criminal behaviour (Horvat et al., 2012, p.23). The youth with behavioural problems often have difficulties in achieving school success and may leave the education system before acquiring qualifications. They need to be encouraged to engage in vocational training and to participate in various education where they will be given the opportunity to acquire knowledge, but also to develop social skills. Exclusion from the sphere of education leads to exclusion from the world of work, which can have serious social and economic consequences. Ultimately, such consequences may guide a person to the margins of society as a member of a deprived or deviant subculture (Horvat et al., 2012, p.25).

Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003) state that street children and youth in the street are in the centre of research of academic communities interested in the common social good for over two decades, and this research has resulted in a phenomenon called "gushing" (publication of the large number of papers on a certain topic). Indicative explanations point to the fact that street children are discarded or "escaped children", which refers to children who intentionally left their homes. These definitions point to several important phenomena - increase in the number of street children, adaptation to survival in street conditions, etc. While street children are the most noticeable citizens, working and living on roads and public squares, public transport stations etc., they are also paradoxically the most invisible, the most subdued group of citizens, so it is much harder to find them and provide them services such as health care and they are the most difficult to be removed from the streets. Every child, just like the cause of his/her life in the street, has a unique, specific and unified, often very strong, view of what surrounds him/her. The research carried out by the Swiss Government, *The Street Link Project Monitoring and Evaluation* (1998-1999), provides results regarding the street children's perspective (WHO, 2012). Most of the children involved in the project are aware of the risk of getting infections during unprotected sex activities. Likewise, they are aware of the dangers of HIV and AIDS as unique problems, but they also feel that they cannot influence the possibility that one day they will be infected. It is proven that street children develop and acquire the knowledge necessary to survive. Regardless of the low level of general knowledge and level of knowledge regarding sexually transmitted diseases, the low degree of self-confidence and the lack of positive image about themselves, in order to be able to face the difficulties of certain situations, but also peer pressure to engage in sexual activity, these children possess certain knowledge regarding sexually transmitted diseases. Another reason for this is the turndown by the world of adults, but also the violence against them (rape, prostitution, usury, hitting, torture, which often results in deaths). Speaking of sexually transmitted diseases, deficiencies are most noticeable in the empowerment of street children's skills, especially those assertive, in order to help them take more account of sexual preferences and choices, all with an aim of protecting against sexually transmitted diseases. The same group of researchers has come to important knowledge: as many as 60% of the street children permanently hold a negative attitude on drug use and narcotics. Like in many other countries, Russia faces a large number of street children, but when it comes to their number, there is no official data. Kissin et al. (2007) state that street children in St. Petersburg, aged between 15 and 19, exhibit an extremely high rate of HIV infection. Among street youth, who inject drugs, HIV seroprevalence has

been the largest ever reported in the Eastern Europe and is among the highest in the world. The research carried out in Iran (Foroughi et al., 2018) shows that the existence of street children and children who work in the street in that country is unquestionable. The uncertain conditions affecting the emergence of this population are disrupted families, poverty, high prevalence of crime among kindred, family members and colleagues. These are the factors that create social harm and high-risk behaviour, including drug addiction, prostitution, and sexual relationships with adolescents or peers. The study, conducted on a sample of thousands of children aged between 10 and 18, including blood tests, shows the following: "4.5% of children were HIV infected, 1.7% were infected with hepatitis B virus and 2.6% were infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV). Having parents who used drugs, infected with HCV and having experience in trading sex significantly increased the likelihood of getting HIV among the street children of Tehran", (Foroughi et al., 2018). The conclusion is that "HIV prevalence among street children is much higher than the general population (<0.1%), and in fact, the rate of positivity comes close to that among female sex workers in Iran. These findings must be an alarm for HIV- related policy makers to consider immediate and special interventions for this at-risk group", (Foroughi et al., 2018).

The life of street children and their interaction with multiple factors in their environment has often developed a special conversational language, a language of subculture (Beazley, 2003), or, specifically, a completely new subculture. Both discourses may exist in these children – both home and street because some children, as has been explained earlier, return to their families. Therefore, both street and family discourse and constructed subculture exist outside homes and families, but children and the youth are generally not homeless. For them, the home still exists in some sense if we use social determinant of a *home in an inhuman world*. The same authors (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003) state that, regardless of whether they sleep in the streets or not, street children construct and reconstruct the meanings of their daily reality in the narrow sense of the word. Adults who look for them in order to work with them have developed social constructions that are basic, or are inwrought through public discourse regarding street children and street youth. Morally powerful social structures of family, home, family life and childhood cannot exist without the construction of "*the other*" – dangers of the street, the amorality of life in the streets and above all, street children outside the sphere of households and the challenge of social existence. In Africa, for example, a home does not have to be permanent in terms of location and material it is made of. When the home is simply on the sidewalk, it is factually in the street. When street children return home, at least periodically, they figuratively also bring with them a part of the street. Contrary to situation in Africa, Stephenson (2002) depicts the economic and social turnarounds in Moscow, created in the streets, not in a private space, the dominant environment of urban life. Apart from being labelled by public discourse as homeless people, street children are often referred to as those without a family or as victims of a family breakdown. Their day-to-day interactive construction of reality captures the entire environment as a potential habitat irrespective of adult tags. They identify and use urban niches for their own safety and pleasure by competing with adults for space and conquering their own space as well as building subcultures and identities of which both, or more, are multiple and alive.

Studies show that street children use public places as means of socialization, work, recreation, personal achievement, learning, survival, but also as all other means. Spaces and use are culturally constructed, often through negotiation of meanings with adults. Street children take advantage of open spaces such as beaches and parks, indoor cinema venues, dance halls, malls, etc. and also turn such places into private workplaces by charging for certain areas like parking places, cleaning or guarding cars. However, there is a question as to how street children are created. Vdović (2008: 67, according to Lalor, 1999, p. 8) lists the classification of delinquency development in three phases, on an example of Colombian children. Thus, pre-gamin child is in the street that makes an income there, but has contacts with his/her family. If there is an opportunity, such child will do minor offenses. The second stage is gamin, a child with very poor contacts with his/her family and a child living with a group of friends and earns a living in the street performing criminal acts. The final stage are older minors who have adopted street norms and ethics. It is very likely that such children will develop into serious criminals in adulthood.

There is no specific information regarding the situation in the Republic of Croatia. Statistical data on children under fifteen years of age are inadequate, as are the data on the nature of such work. Such data would largely help to address the problems of street children in Croatia as well as presenting the actual picture of the situation. Children's rights fighters and members of the Children's Rights Committee are particularly concerned about the lack of classified statistics and other information on the status of children, especially those belonging to different ethnic groups and the most vulnerable groups. This type of data is missing especially in relation to female children, street children, children with disabilities, displaced children, refugees, members of minority ethnic groups, etc. On the website of the *Government of the United States of America*, under the *Office for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour,* there are exhaustive data from this domain for all countries of the world, as well as for Croatia, but data on street children in Croatia are insufficient. The *International Committee for the Rights of Children* expresses its concern that a large number of children in Croatia is without parental care or children who have lost contact with their families, and as one of the main causes is the poor state of the country during the war period from 1991 to 1995. Bad conditions imply underdeveloped economy, poor management,

underdeveloped tourism, high unemployment rate, uneven regional development and a growing national deficit, all caused by the long and severe war. However, as long as no valid research is carried out, the real image will be inadequate and everything will be based on mere assumptions. This pointing to the lack of statistical data and scientific research requires new research that will bring a real insight into the real image of things. In this context, important is *Case Study of Young Members of Socially Excluded Groups* that, apart from bringing individual case studies, also makes recommendations for each individual social group. Only when problems and the reality of the situation in which a particular country are identified it will be possible to act preventively. Since the Republic of Croatia is mainly a transit country during this immigration crisis, it is unlikely that the number of immigrants and refugees will increase. However, some of immigrants will remain in Croatia and increase the numbers of this extremely vulnerable group.[1] A special problem are the children who are lost during the migration or who serve as a "means" of illegal entry into Europe, as was the case with the five-year-old Syrian girl Allsom, whose father probably lost her in the Republic of Croatia, according to media reports, (Pušić, 2018). Such children, if they really existed and if they are not found in time, can potentially become white slaves, victims of human trafficking.

3. Capital creation

Street children, no matter which state or city they are in, often come to criminal acts and pathological behaviour (especially street prostitution) to earn money for food and drinks. The term *social capital* is widely used when looking at the property created by children living in the street. Stephenson (2006) advocates for inclusion of this concept in the discourse on street children. In order to create capital, street children need to be able to cope with the ability to calculate and pay with money. These ideas are a challenge, from the perspective of children as economic factors, and are often of vital importance for the survival of their families and look at children's attempts to reconstruct lost families and create a supportive social network. Many children are becoming involved in the criminal community and the "de-capitalization" of their diminished social capital. Children, forced to earn money, are also involved in non-criminal and criminal subcultures as a way of gaining access to important networks and resources. The youth use their social skills and appropriate subcultural standards and values to build alternative careers. For example, homeless children in Moscow are resourceful and socio-active actors who find alternate families and create *ad hoc* social benefits. In order to earn in the streets, these children must have developed many knowledge and abilities. Spatial skills and highly developed visual and acoustic abilities are important for avoiding, escaping, and detecting risks. Street children, often with very developed diction, are very capable of exchanging money (returning change, etc.) at marketplaces. What adults see when it comes to street children are "dirty children, delinquents, who always have problems with the law". This is precisely the negative construct of adults and the connection to the disorder of the public in such an understanding. In a factual, provable sense, it can be argued that the streets are dirty and unhealthy environment. Strangely and ironically, there is limited interest in the health of street children in relation to this general attitude. Namely, there is some evidence that street children are actually healthier and perhaps less malnourished when compared to their contemporaries living in slums and favelas. The reason for this may be the fact that the strongest and most active children will most likely have the courage and energy to try for street life (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003). Their moral, spiritual and intellectual health is often better than that of their peers who do not live in the street. Children in the streets do not replace moral values with asocial attitudes, street children seem to have extraordinary norms of behaviour and aspiration. Although they rarely state it, street children often have a clear religious attachment and loyalty. Life and life skills learned in the streets can be more useful than knowledge learned in inadequate schools, with the ignorance or insults by the teachers. Similarly, some researchers say, according to Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003), that results derived from the use of psychometric tests and clinical assessments of street boys in South Africa show that cognitive abilities are "contextually structured, stimulating and mediated".

4. Conclusion

Street children are a growing global problem we cannot turn our heads from. A growing number of more than 100 million such children favours this thesis. This problem, often referred to as a disease, is also present in Croatia, but there is little or no knowledge about it, which is proven by insufficient relevant data and research, as well as the bleak media image of these children, but without an explanation how and why children become street children. This paper presents possible reasons for why and how children become street children. They are not just a term, they live and exist among us, and often we are

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[1] According to the Ministry of Interior statistics, out of 10 asylum seekers, as many as 8 (77%) leave Croatia before the procedure is completed, with an aim of ending up at the desired destination. And from 2016 to today, 14 asylum-seekers of 1042 who filed for asylum in Croatia have been deported, (net.hr, 2018).

not aware of it. Switzerland is among the first to make important steps to understand this phenomenon, but it is still insufficient. Since the majority of children in the street are illiterate, undesirable, and marginalized in society, there is a problem with coming to legitimate data, and thus prevention. What is mentioned as one of the main problems that turns children into street children is abuse and neglect in the family, which encourages children to leave their families completely and surrender themselves to the street. Thus, the family is being imposed as the primary and the main social factor of this problematic phenomenon.

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