



Street Children Phenomenon: Sociodemographic Characteristics and Associated Factors. Case of the City of Lubumbashi in the DRC

Bassema Kindja Marie France¹, Ilunga Kandolo Simon^{1*}, Bienfait Mwarabu Much'Apa¹, Ndayi Kabamba Julie¹, Malemba-N'Sakila Gilbert²

¹School of Public Health, University of Lubumbashi, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo

²Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social, Political and Administrative Sciences, University of Lubumbashi, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Email: *silungak@gmail.com, *profsimonilunga@gmail.com, *ilunga.kandolo@unilu.ac.cd

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Abstract

Introduction: The phenomenon of street children is a consequence of the socio-political crisis affecting many countries. It is difficult to accurately count the number of street children, as they pose a threat to society. The objective of this study is to assess the situation of street children living in Lubumbashi. **Methods:** We conducted a cross-sectional descriptive study from November 1 to 30, 2021, in the seven municipalities of the city of Lubumbashi with street children present at the time of our survey who voluntarily agreed to respond to our questionnaire. A total of 250 street children were surveyed, and the information collected was encoded and analyzed using Epi Info 7. Proportions, sample sizes, as well as the mean and its standard deviation were calculated. The chi-square was used for associations at a significance level of alpha equal to 5%. **Results:** The majority of street children are male (85%); the average age is 13 years (± 9). The minimum age is 9 years, and the maximum age is 17 years; most of them come from the central part of the country (56.9%). Begging is the most common activity among street children (52.8%). All street children consume psychoactive substances (100%) and cannabis is used in 81.2% of cases for reasons such as: integrating into the group and chasing away fear (36.4%). **Conclusion:** Proper supervision of these children by the Congolese state, organizations, and parental responsibility would help eradicate the phenomenon of street children in our community.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Street Child, Sociodemographic Characteristics, Associated Factors, Lubumbashi

1. Introduction

For several years, global public opinion has been made aware of the situation of street children, but generally in ways that primarily emphasize sensational and emotional aspects, leading to a great confusion of concepts that prevents a proper understanding of the nature, scope, and complexity of the phenomenon, which cannot be effectively addressed without having properly understood it [1].

The meaning given to the concept of “street” in this study refers to what Malemba M. N’Sakila [2] is considered as “any environment that is outside the family environment. It refers, in other words, to any place that is outside the parental home and is therefore not subject to parental authority”. A young person living away from their family, even if it’s with a neighbor or close relatives without prior permission from the parents or their substitutes, is deemed a street child.

According to UNICEF, the number of street children is 120 million worldwide. It is difficult to count them precisely, but there are thirty million in Africa and eleven million in India. Most of them are boys who are professionally or sexually exploited. Very vulnerable, they are the great victims of diseases, poor diet, traffic and other dangers of the city [3].

A study conducted in Haiti in Port-au-Prince indicates that the lack of shelters, the worsening socio-economic conditions of families, the increasing impoverishment of the country, and the accelerated pace of rural exodus contribute to homelessness and the rise in the number of street children [4]. In 2015, France had more than 31,000 homeless children living on the street [5].

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Government published on January 10, 2009, the “Law No. 09/00” concerning the protection of the Child, which establishes the fundamental principles related to the protection of children and the promotion of their rights, in accordance with articles 122, point 6, 123, point 16, and 149 of the Constitution. This law aims to “ensure that the child has the right to benefit from various measures of an administrative, social, judicial, educational, health, and other nature aimed at protecting him from all forms of abandonment, neglect, exploitation, and physical, moral, psychological, and sexual harm”. The legislation also seeks to “strengthen the responsibility of parents, families, and the entire community towards the child”... This law text provides a significant basis for collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active in the field of child protection and the competent public authorities, but its implementation and potential are still underutilized [1].

In Kinshasa, the Shégués, boys and girls of varying ages, populate the spaces of the megacity day and night. Difficult to quantify, the phenomenon is part of the

daily life of the residents of the capital of the DRC [6].

For Filip de Boeck, the majority of the interviewed Shégués were born in Kinshasa and come from families with heterogeneous social and geographical backgrounds [7]. According to Caroline Six quoted by Dugrand, some were rejected from the family circle due to accusations of witchcraft against them, a phenomenon often encouraged by the so-called “Revival” churches [6].

In 2003, the Urban Change Observatory (OCU) reported about 2000 children in the streets of Lubumbashi, who work in the streets during the day but return home in the evening, and 700 street children, who have more or less permanently broken away from their families and live, work, and sleep in the streets [8]. Aged between 5 and 20 years old, these individuals earn their living by engaging in various activities: begging, street vending, logging, services, pickpocketing, and for girls, prostitution. Besides food, the money they earn is largely spent on leisure, particularly on movies and drugs (cannabis, glue, and alcohol) [9].

It should be noted that in our environment, there are few studies on street children. As for us, we are interested in the socio-demographic characteristics of street children as well as the factors associated with the phenomenon of street children in the city of Lubumbashi.

2. Method

2.1. Study Design

We conducted an analytical cross-sectional study on the phenomenon of street children in the city of Lubumbashi over the period from November 1 to November 30, 2021.

2.2. Study Population and Sample Size

The size of our sample was around 250 street children of all ages and both sexes, found in the municipalities of the city of Lubumbashi who agreed to voluntarily respond to our questionnaire.

2.3. Collection and Analysis

The data useful for this study were collected through guided interviews using a questionnaire. The software Word and Excel 2013 as well as Epi Info version 7.2.4.0 were used for data encoding and analysis. We calculated proportions for qualitative variables and for quantitative variables, we also calculated position parameters. The Chi-squared test served as our measure of association while the P-value was used for the statistical significance test.

3. Resultats

Boys are predominantly represented (85%) versus girls (15%).

Table 1 informs us that most children are in the age range between 10 and 13, with an average age of 13 years (± 9 years), with a minimum age of 9 years and a maximum of 17 years. In 59.6%, the children come from the central province of

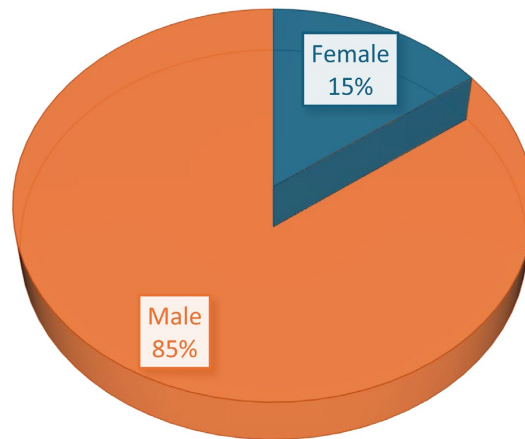


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by gender.

Table 1. Distribution according to sociodemographic characteristics.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age group (years)		
≤9	52	20.6
10 - 13	114	45
14 - 17	77	30.4
≥18	7	2.8
Total	250	100
Province of origin		
Upper Katanga	45	18
Lualaba	3	1.2
East Zone of the DRC	11	4.4
West of the DRC	12	4.8
Central Zone	149	59.6
East Zone of the DRC	8	3.2
Upper Lomami	22	8.8
Activity to survive		
N = 250		
I dig through garbage	47	18.8
I work	37	14.8
I perform illegal work	5	2
I manage	2	0.8
I beg	132	52.8
I steal	43	17.2
I prostitute myself	18	7.2
I make contracts	1	0.4
I sell	62	24.8

Table 2. Distribution of respondents according to whether they have already had sexual intercourse.

Have already had sexual intercourse	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	176	70.4
No	74	29.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>250</i>	<i>100</i>
Place where the sexual intercourse took place	Frequency (n = 176)	Percentage
At the market	15	8.5
In the bush	44	25
Hotel	38	21.6
Unfinished house	10	5.7
Partner's house	1	0.6
In the street	92	52.3
At a friend's house	1	0.6
In the warehouse	1	0.6
In the nightclub	2	1.1
In a damaged car	3	1.7
In a house	9	5.1
Several places	1	0.6
Toilets	1	0.6
Having worn a condom during the last sexual intercourse	Frequency	Percentage
No	98	55.7
Yes	78	44.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>176</i>	<i>100</i>

the country and engage in begging to survive.

Table 2 shows that 70.4% of respondents had already had sexual intercourse. The fact that morality is not a rule of life in the street, along with the sense of personal responsibility, are reasons that may explain this situation. **Table 2** also shows that 52.3% of respondents had already had sexual intercourse in the street, compared to 1, or 0.6%, respectively in restrooms, in a storage place, at a friend's house, at the partner's house, and in various locations. The street does not require money like a hotel, so it would be a preferred place for these children to have sexual intercourse. 98 respondents, or 55.7%, had their last sexual intercourse without a condom. One must be aware of the importance of using condoms (both male and female) to use them. Most street children are not the target of health communicators for various reasons, including the fear of being attacked and the

difficulty of approaching them at their gathering sites where they only go late at night.

Table 3. Consumption of psychoactive substances.

Utility of the consumption of psychoactive substances	Frequency (n = 250)	Percentage
Forget his current fate	25	10%
To give oneself courage and drive away shame	91	36.4%
To feel strong and invulnerable in the face of threats	28	11.2%
Relaxation	40	16%
Eliminate the cold	12	4.8%
Integrate into the group	78	31.2%
Type of psychoactive substances consumed		
Cannabis	203	81.2%
Alcohol	167	66.8%
Valium	29	11.6%
Glue	248	99.2%
Glue and valium	156	62.4%
Cannabis, glue, alcohol and valium	137	54.8%

Table 3 shows us that 250 children (All) or 100% reported using psychoactive substances, with the main reasons being to gain courage and chase away shame (36.4%). Glue is the most used substance at 99.2%. The influence of peers (peer pressure, feeling of not being an outsider in the group, etc.) would explain this observation.

Table 4. Distribution of children according to the hassle on the street.

To be worried	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	195	78
No	55	22
<i>Total</i>	250	100
People who worry	Frequency (n = 195)	Percentage
JUNAFEC	23	11.8
The elders of the street	103	52.8
The friends in the street	75	38.5
The market vendors	57	29.2
The friends in the street	3	1.5
The passersby	50	25.6
The police officer	165	84.6

In 78% of cases, street children have been victims of harassment. It is clear from **Table 4** that 84.6% of the surveyed individuals were troubled by the police, 52.8% by the elders of the street, 29.2% by the market vendors, 11.8% by the JUNAFEC (The youth of a political party), and 1.5% by the friends they have on the street. The desire to share the daily loot would explain our observation.

Table 5. Factors associated with the desire to leave the street.

Variables	Wanting to leave the street		Chi-2	P
	No	Yes		
To have at least one parent alive				
No	101 (75.9)	63 (53.8%)	13.5	0.002
Yes	32 (24.1%)	54 (46.2%)		
Time Spent on the Street				
Equal to or greater than 5 years	98 (49.3)	18 (35.3%)	3.1	0.07
Under 5 years	101 (50.8%)	33 (64.7%)		
Sex				
Male	202 (97.6)	11 (85.2%)	146.4	<0.001
Female	5 (2.4%)	32 (74.4%)		
Trouble on the street				
yes	180 (82.6)	15 (46.9%)	20.7	<0.001
No	38 (17.4%)	17 (53.1%)		
Attempt to contact the parents				
No	186 (93.9)	36 (69.3%)	25.3	<0.001
Yes	12 (6.1%)	16 (30.8%)		
Have already had sexual intercourse				
Yes	127 (68.7)	49 (75.4%)	1.05	0.306
No	58 (31.4%)	16 (24.6%)		

Children who do not have at least one living parent are more likely not to want to leave the streets (75.9%) than those with at least one living parent (24.1%). This difference is statistically significant ($P = 0.002$). The lack of love or even the mistreatment inherent in the absence of one parent would explain this situation. Children under 5 years old on the street are more likely to want to leave the street (50.8%) than those over 5 years old (49.3%). This difference is not statistically significant ($P = 0.07$). It can be concluded from **Table 5** that there is no statistically significant link between the desire to leave the street and the time spent on the street ($P = 0.07$). Male children are at greater risk of not wanting to leave the street (97.6%) compared to female children (2.4%). This difference is statistically significant ($P < 0.001$). A large proportion of troubled children on the street do not want

to leave (82.6%) versus 17.4%. This difference is significant ($P < 0.001$). Children who have not had contact with their parents were less likely to leave the street than others (6.1%). This difference is significant ($P < 0.001$). Children who have already had at least one sexual encounter (68.7%) were more likely not to want to leave the street than those who have never had sexual intercourse (31.4%). This difference is not statistically significant ($P = 0.306$).

4. Discussion

At the end of this study, we found that 85% of the street children surveyed were male compared to 15% who were female (**Figure 1**). This represents a sex ratio of 5.7. These results are like those found in a study conducted in Lubumbashi by the FAO, which observed 84.8% boys. Our results show that most respondents, 45%, were aged between 10 - 13 years (**Table 1**). The median age of respondents was 17 years. The minimum age was 9 years, and the maximum age was 33 years. Our results differ from those found in Gabon, where most children are in the age range of 8 to 20 years. At Pointe Noire in Congo Brazzaville, a study revealed that children aged between 12 and 15 represented 48.35% in 2017.

Most street children come from the central provinces of the DRC (59.6%), as indicated in **Table 1**. The same observation was made in the same city in 2011 [10]. However, other authors who conducted their studies in the same city as we did observed that most street children came from the same city (Lubumbashi) [11].

Regarding activities for survival, begging was the main activity (52.8%) versus surveyed individuals who begged versus 0.8% who stated they manage (selling cigarettes, street shoe shiners, etc.) (**Table 1**). In Kinshasa, Butangu found that street children, specifically some girls, engage in manual work in private, sell fruits, or resort to prostitution [12], and begging was the most practiced activity by children to survive (37.5%) [13].

Nearly seven out of ten children (70.4%) had already had sexual intercourse, among whom 55.7% had their last sexual encounters without a condom (**Table 2**). Places chosen for these sexual encounters were the street in 52.3% of cases. Oppong, in his study conducted in Ghana, observed that the majority of street children had already had sexual relations without a condom with multiple sexual partners [14].

Regarding daily life on the street, 78% of those surveyed were troubled, among which 84.6% were troubled by the police, 52.8% by the street elders, 29.2% by market sellers, 11.8% by the youth of the political party called the Union of Nationalists and Federalists of Congo (JUNAFEC), and 1.5% by friends with whom they are on the street (**Table 4**). A study conducted in Lubumbashi and Kipushi reveals that 63.3% of children have been victims of harassment on the street [15].

Still in Lubumbashi, the study conducted by Bora *et al.* shows that almost all street children have already been subject to arrests; of which 96% are minor offenses and 78% are serious offenses [16]. While in Kinshasa, street children say they are victims of harassment, assault, torture, rape, sexual abuse, roundups, illegal

imprisonment, etc. from adults and security officers (police and military) [12].

Regarding the attempt to return home and the parents' reaction, 85.6% of the respondents were not tempted to be taken home by their parents; 88.8% of the respondents stated that they had not attempted to contact their parents (Table 5). Among those who tried to contact their parents, 53.6% reported that the parents did not care, labeling them as witches. Some authors found in their studies that most children had contact with their biological parents (57.6%) and 94% slept at home at least once a week [13].

In India, it has been found that all forms of abuse were common, but that physical violence (74%) was the highest and that the police (25.5%) were a significant perpetrator. Young children were much more vulnerable [17].

Close to seven out of ten children (70.4%) had already had sexual intercourse, among which 55.7% had their last sexual encounter without a condom. The chosen location for these sexual encounters was the street in 52.3% of cases. Unlike hotels where you have to pay for sexual services, the street offers the advantage of free access. Oppong, in his study conducted in Ghana, observed that the majority of street children have already had sexual relations without a condom with multiple sexual partners [18].

Article 33 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, known as CRC, states that "the child has the right to be protected from the use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, and from their use in the production and distribution of such substances". We found that the prevalence of psychoactive substance use is 100%. This proportion, although higher, is close to that found in Kipushi (87.7%) (Boniface) as well as that found in Ethiopia (30.8%) [19]. Addiction is a process by which a behavior is performed that may serve to provide pleasure and relieve internal discomfort, and is characterized by repeated failures of control and its persistence, despite negative consequences [20].

Nine out of ten children (99.2%) consume glue (Table 3). Our results differ from those found in Lubumbashi by Bora, who observed that alcohol was consumed at 92%, while the proportion of hemp consumption was 72% [16].

5. Conclusion

The family is the main support for children, and any strategy aimed at protecting them must be a priority. However, some children find refuge on the streets because society pushes them there, and even the country's policies force families to move from one corner to another without means of survival.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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