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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of street children remains a persistent social crisis in Tanzania, particularly in urban areas like Arusha City, where poverty, family breakdown, and rapid urbanization have contributed to the rising number of children living and working on the streets. Despite various government and NGO interventions, many reintegration efforts fail due to institutional mistrust and socio-cultural disconnects. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of street children in Arusha City, examine the challenges of institutional reintegration, and analyze the socio-cultural dynamics that influence their return to street life. A cross-sectional research design was employed, focusing on Kati Ward, a central and socio-economically diverse area within Arusha. The study population included street children, community members, and key informants such as local leaders and child welfare officers. A sample size of 100 respondents was determined using Yamane's formula and data were collected through structured questionnaires for street children and community members and unstructured interviews for key informants. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), with results presented through descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Key findings revealed that 77% of street children were aged 10–14, 82% were male and 68% had only reached primary education.

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of street children remains a persistent social crisis in Tanzania, particularly in urban areas like Arusha City, where poverty, family breakdown, and rapid urbanization have contributed to the rising number of children living and working on the streets. Despite various government and NGO interventions, many reintegration efforts fail due to institutional mistrust and socio-cultural disconnects. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of street children in Arusha City, examine the challenges of institutional reintegration and analyze the socio-cultural dynamics that influence their return to street life. A cross-sectional research design was employed, focusing on Kati Ward, a central and socio-economically diverse area within Arusha. The study population included street children, community members, and key informants such as local leaders and Social welfare officers. A sample size of 100 respondents was determined using Yamane's formula, and data were collected through structured questionnaires for street children and community members and unstructured interviews for key informants. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), with results presented through descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Key findings revealed that 77% of street children were aged 10–14, 82% were male, and 68% had only reached primary education. Rehabilitation centres and education initiatives were the most cited interventions, yet many children return to the streets due to emotional disconnection and systemic gaps. The study concludes that sustainable reintegration requires a holistic, community-based approach that addresses root

causes and incorporates the voices and needs of street children themselves.

Keywords: street children, reintegration, urban poverty, socio-cultural dynamics, arusha city.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of street children is a persistent global crisis, affecting both developed and developing nations. Rooted in poverty, rapid urbanization, and social disintegration, millions of children worldwide are forced to survive under harsh street conditions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018; UNICEF, 2018). In countries such as the Philippines, despite significant involvement from government and civil society, reintegration efforts often fail. Many children reject institutional care or revert to street life, citing emotional disconnect, institutional mistrust, or the familiarity of street survival strategies (Mvungi, 2012; Reyes, 2021). Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including ChildHope Philippines, Bahay Tuluyan, and the Virlanie Foundation, work to address these gaps by offering shelters, psychosocial rehabilitation and education. (ChildHope Philippines, 2022; Virlanie Foundation, 2020). Government initiatives through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), such as the Haven for Children program, provide therapeutic care for children affected by trauma and substance abuse. However these efforts face persistent challenges in reaching and retaining the most vulnerable children (DSWD, 2021; Reyes & Cruz, 2019).

In Africa, the issue is compounded by historical, structural and socioeconomic dynamics, including rapid population growth, wealth inequality and the lingering impacts of colonial legacies and structural adjustment programs (Raffaelli & Koller, 2016; Omondi & Ochieng, 2020). Street children, commonly referred to as Watoto wa Mitaani in Tanzania, Chokoraa in Kenya, and Moineaux in the Democratic Republic of Congo, embody a visible yet neglected population (UNICEF, 2018). These children are frequently mischaracterized as delinquents rather than victims of systemic failure, thereby influencing public attitudes and policy interventions (Mvungi et al., 2012; Ouma, 2021).

In Tanzania, the growing number of street children is driven largely by poverty, the breakdown of family structures and economic fragility. The loss of caregivers and the inability of extended families to absorb orphaned children has created a pathway to street life (Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children [MoHCDGEC], 2016). Although the government has established rehabilitation centers through the Ministry, many children either evade these institutions or escape shortly after entry. According to Global Giving (2023), Tanzania is estimated to have approximately 437,000 street children, though earlier figures were as high as 849,054 (UNICEF, 2016). Irregular reporting and fragmented data systems obscure the true scale of the crisis, complicating intervention efforts (Kweka, 2020).

Arusha City Council mirrors these national trends. Urban migration, economic stagnation and the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS-related deaths have resulted in increased numbers of orphaned and abandoned children. These children often turn to the streets due to the inability of families to meet their basic needs (MoHCDGEC, 2016). A survey cited by Tanzania Daily News in 2012 placed the number of vulnerable children in the country at 849,054. More recent data from Global Giving (2023) lowered this estimate to 437,500. Despite these figures, inconsistencies in data make it difficult to assess trends reliably. A 2011 local census indicated a temporary decline in Arusha,

with 520 street children reported, while numbers in nearby Moshi increased (UNICEF, 2016).

A study by the Mkombozi Centre for Street Children (2015) found that 22% of street children in Arusha ended up on the streets due to school exclusion and inability to pay school fees. Government initiatives aimed at linking these children with care institutions have shown limited success. Many children eventually return to the streets, driven by institutional mistrust, a sense of autonomy or peer networks. Over time, they become embedded in risky survival strategies such as begging, drug trafficking, pickpocketing, and child prostitution (Onyango, 2018; Kweka, 2020). These children often originate from homes plagued by extreme poverty, abuse or orphanhood conditions that are insufficiently addressed by current policy frameworks.

Although the problem is arguably less severe in Arusha compared to some urban centers, it remains urgent and solvable. Khamala (2015) notes that during Tanzania's independence era, the issue of street children was unforeseen. The few juvenile institutions inherited from the colonial period were deemed sufficient, but as the number of street children has grown, these mechanisms have become inadequate. The increase in children on the streets, particularly in rapidly urbanizing regions like Arusha, signals a breakdown in both preventive and responsive systems of care. As emphasized by Madihi et al. (2019), effective interventions must move beyond institutional responses to include community-based approaches, education reintegration and family strengthening services.

While numerous studies have explored the drivers of child homelessness and the limitations of institutional interventions, there is a notable lack of context-specific, up-to-date empirical research on the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration programs for street children in Arusha City. Most existing literature either aggregates national data or relies on outdated statistics, which limits policy responsiveness. Furthermore, little attention has been given to understanding the perspectives of the street children themselves regarding what constitutes a

successful reintegration pathway. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of street children in Arusha, the challenges of institutional reintegration and the socio-cultural dynamics that influence their return to street life.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Area

Kati Ward is an ideal study area for exploring the lived experiences and reintegration challenges of street children in Arusha from a socio-cultural perspective due to its central location, socio-economic dynamics and high human traffic. As the heart of Arusha City, Kati hosts the Central and Samunge markets, which are major economic hubs that attract large populations, including vulnerable groups such as street children who rely on such public spaces for survival through begging, vending, or scavenging. The ward's concentration of financial institutions, commercial activities and key landmarks makes it a magnet for informal livelihoods, increasing the visibility and interaction of street children with diverse community actors (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Additionally, Kati Ward is surrounded by key administrative and residential areas, creating a socio-cultural mix that influences the behavior, survival strategies and social stigmas street children face. Its mix of public institutions, religious sites like the Arusha Ijumaa Mosque, and historical schools makes it a culturally significant space where various community norms and values intersect. These elements offer rich ground for examining the cultural perceptions, institutional support systems and reintegration efforts targeting street children. Thus, the ward provides both the environmental and social context necessary for understanding how urban dynamics shape street children's lived experiences and the challenges they encounter when attempting reintegration into society.

2.2 Research Design

In this study, researchers employed a cross-sectional research design because it allowed them

to involve different groups of people who varied in the variable of interest while sharing common characteristics such as socioeconomic status, educational background, and ethnicity.

2.3 Target Population

The population of this study comprised individuals relevant to the lived experiences and reintegration challenges of street children within the socio-cultural context of Kati Ward, Arusha. This included street children themselves, community members, local leaders, market vendors and representatives from institutions involved in child welfare and social support. These groups were selected based on their proximity, interaction, or influence on street children's daily lives and reintegration processes. According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, Kati Ward had a total population of 7,829 residents (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), providing a diverse and socially dynamic environment suitable for capturing varied perspectives and experiences related to the study topic.

2.4 Sample Size

The study specifically targeted street children residing within Kati Ward. However, due to the lack of an official registry or comprehensive data on the number of street children in the area, the total ward population of 7,829 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022) was used as a statistical proxy to estimate a representative sample size. This approach allowed the researchers to derive a reasonable estimate despite data limitations. To determine the appropriate sample size, Yamane's formula was applied using a 10% margin of error.

Where n = sample size

N = total population (7,829)

e = margin of error (0.1)

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Whereby n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the margin of error.

So,

$$n = \frac{7,829}{1 + 7,829 \times (0.1)^2} = \frac{7,829}{78.29} = 100$$

2.5 Sampling procedure

In this study, researchers employed simple random sampling to ensure that every individual within the target population had an equal chance of being included in the sample. This method was particularly appropriate for selecting street children and community members, as it minimized selection bias and enhanced the representativeness of the sample. Given the diversity of the population and the need for balanced perspectives, simple random sampling allowed for a fair distribution of respondents, ensuring that all eligible individuals had an equal opportunity to participate in the study.

Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select key informants such as the Ward Executive Officer (WEO) and Village Executive Officer (VEO). This non-probability sampling technique was suitable for identifying participants with specific knowledge and expertise relevant to the study's objectives. Including these officials helped the researchers gain in-depth insights into the reintegration mechanisms, administrative challenges, and institutional roles related to street children. Therefore, purposive sampling complemented the random sampling approach by securing reliable and context-rich information essential for addressing the research questions effectively.

2.6 Data Collection Methods

In this study, questionnaires were used to collect data from street children and community members. These questionnaires consisted of structured, closed-ended questions designed to be

easy for respondents to complete, while also allowing the researchers to efficiently quantify and analyze the responses. This method was appropriate for gathering general perceptions, experiences, and attitudes related to the lived experiences and reintegration challenges of street children within the community.

In addition, interviews were used to collect data from key informants such as the Ward Executive Officer (WEO), Village Executive Officer (VEO), and other relevant stakeholders. The researchers employed unstructured interview techniques, which allowed for open-ended, flexible questioning. This approach enabled the interviewers to explore complex issues in greater depth and gain rich, detailed insights into institutional roles, reintegration efforts and socio-cultural dynamics influencing the lives of street children in Kati Ward.

2.7 Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was facilitated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The collected data were first coded and then processed to generate descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequency distributions. The results were systematically presented using tables for clarity and ease of interpretation.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of the respondents, including their age, sex and education level.

3.2 Age of Respondents

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents (n=100)

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
5–9	17	17.0%
10–14	77	77.0%
15–19	6	6.0%
Total	100	100.0

The findings in Table 1 reveal that the majority of respondents (77.0%) were aged between 10 and 14 years, followed by 17.0% who were aged between 5 and 9 years. Only 6.0% of respondents fell within the 15 to 19-year age group. These results suggest that children aged 10 to 14 constitute the largest

segment of street children in Arusha City. This age group is generally more independent, mobile and actively involved in street-based activities such as begging and informal labor, making them more visible in urban public spaces.

3.3 Sex of Respondents

Table 2: Sex Profile of Respondents (n=100)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	82	82.0%
Female	18	18.0%
Total	100	100.0

The findings in Table 2. Indicates that male street children make up the majority (82.0%) compared to their female counterparts (18.0%). This disparity may be attributed to the fact that female street children are more likely to benefit from

early interventions or protective measures. They are often taken into shelters or reintegrated with families more quickly than male children, which may explain their lower visibility and representation on the streets.

3.4 Education Level of Respondents

Table 3: Education Level of Respondents (n=100)

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Primary Education	68	68.0%
Secondary Education	32	32.0%
Total	100	100.0

The findings reveal that the majority of street children (68.0%) have completed only primary education, while 32.0% have attained secondary education. This indicates that many street children likely dropped out of school due to underlying factors such as poverty, loss of parental care, domestic violence and limited access to basic necessities. These barriers not only hinder their educational advancement but also increase their vulnerability to life on the streets, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address these root causes.

3.5 Interventions Adopted by the Government and NGOs in Addressing Street Children

The findings presented in Table 4 show that rehabilitation centres were the most frequently

cited intervention (42.0%), followed by education initiatives (33.0%). Other strategies, such as outreach programs (12.0%), awareness campaigns (8.0%) and legal protection (5.0%), were mentioned less often. This suggests that stakeholder efforts are primarily concentrated on shelter provision and educational access for street children. While these interventions are critical, the overreliance on institutional responses may overlook the complex socio-cultural and legal challenges that hinder long-term reintegration. A more comprehensive and sustainable approach is needed, one that incorporates legal reforms, community-based outreach and family-strengthening strategies to address the root causes of street life.

These findings support Wainaina (2017), who noted that despite the existence of government-run rehabilitation programs, many street children eventually return to the streets. This recurring pattern highlights the limitations of current

institutional models and underscores the importance of child-centered, context-specific interventions that foster trust, emotional connection and lasting reintegration into society.

Table 4: Interventions Adopted by Government and NGOs (n=100)

Intervention Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Rehabilitation Centres	42	42.0%
Education Initiatives	33	33.0%
Outreach Programs	12	12.0%
Awareness Campaigns	8	8.0%
Legal Protection	5	5.0%
Total	100	100.0

3.6 Views on how to Minimize the Influx of Street Children

The results are in Table 5. Indicates that half of the respondents (50.0%) emphasized the importance of improved family care, highlighting the critical role a stable and supportive home environment plays in preventing children from resorting to street life. Additionally, 30.0% pointed to increased access to education, while 20.0% advocated for greater awareness and use of family planning as key preventive measures. These responses suggest that the majority of street children likely come from dysfunctional, impoverished or overburdened households. As such, there is a pressing need to strengthen social

protection systems that address family instability, economic hardship, and barriers to education.

Although the prevalence of street children in Arusha City may be lower than in some larger urban centers, the findings indicate that the issue remains significant and solvable. With a strategic combination of policy commitment, community engagement, and evidence-based interventions focused on prevention and family support, the city can reduce the number of children resorting to street life. The results underscore the importance of shifting from reactive, institutional responses to proactive, family - and community-centered approaches that tackle the root causes of vulnerability.

Table 5: Suggested Solutions to Reduce Street Children in Urban Areas (n=100)

Suggested Solution	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Provision of Education	30	30.0%
Family Planning Awareness	20	20.0%
Ensuring Good Family Care	50	50.0%
Total	100	100.0

Interviews with key informants revealed that;

“.....most street children in Arusha originate from families facing extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse, leading to a breakdown in parental care. Respondents also stressed that poor parenting skills and a lack of awareness

about child development contribute significantly to children leaving home. Additionally, several informants emphasized that reintegration efforts often fail because they overlook the emotional and social needs of these children, focusing instead on temporary institutional solutions.”

These qualitative insights strongly reinforce the quantitative findings, where 50.0% of respondents identified improved family care as the most effective strategy to minimize the influx of street children. Both data sets point to the home environment as a critical factor, suggesting that without addressing family dysfunction and poverty, other interventions may fall short. Moreover, the emphasis on education (30.0%) and family planning (20.0%) in the quantitative results is echoed in the interviews, where informants cited lack of educational access and overburdened households as underlying drivers of child homelessness. Together, the qualitative and quantitative findings highlight the urgent need for a holistic, community-based approach that prioritizes family strengthening, education access, and preventive social services over institutional containment.

When interviews were conducted with one among the Key Informants, once said:

“.....Street children were involved in drug abuse, sexual abuse, and other deviant behaviors; even if they are misused by law enforcement agencies, police and other adults. In this regard, existing rules and laws may be implemented like the prohibition of drugs like glue, heroin and cocaine. Awareness training may be arranged for police and other law enforcement agencies to save street children's lives.” (Key informant revealed)”

The quote from the key informant highlights the multifaceted vulnerability of street children, who are not only victims of drug and sexual abuse but also suffer exploitation at the hands of law enforcement and other adults. This situation reflects a deep systemic failure where children in need of protection are instead subjected to further harm. The informant's call for the implementation of existing laws, especially those prohibiting harmful substances like glue, heroin, and cocaine, underscores the urgent need for legal and institutional accountability. Moreover, the recommendation for awareness training for police and law enforcement agents is crucial, as it emphasizes the importance of shifting their role from enforcers to protectors. Such training would

sensitize them to the unique circumstances of street children and promote humane, child-centered approaches that prioritize rehabilitation and safety over punishment and exploitation. The implication of this is that without urgent reforms and deliberate intervention, street children will continue to suffer abuse, fall deeper into cycles of addiction and criminalization, and remain excluded from support systems meant to protect their rights and dignity. This not only jeopardizes their futures but also perpetuates broader societal challenges related to crime, poverty and public health.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of street children in Arusha City, the challenges they face in institutional reintegration and the socio-cultural factors influencing their return to street life. The findings revealed that the majority of street children are between the ages of 10 and 14, predominantly male and most have only attained primary education. These demographic trends reflect broader systemic issues, including poverty, broken family structures, and inadequate access to education and social services. Although various interventions such as rehabilitation centres, education initiatives and outreach programs have been implemented by both the government and NGOs, their effectiveness remains limited. Many children continue to reject institutional care due to mistrust, emotional disconnection and a sense of autonomy built around street life.

Moreover, the study highlights that sustainable reintegration cannot be achieved through institutional efforts alone. Respondents emphasized the importance of strengthening family care systems, increasing access to education and promoting family planning as key strategies for preventing children from ending up on the streets. The socio-cultural environment in areas like Kati Ward significantly shapes how street children experience and respond to reintegration efforts. Therefore, a more holistic, community-based approach rooted in local realities and inclusive of children's voices is essential for designing effective interventions.

Future policies should prioritize not only rescue and rehabilitation but also prevention, long-term psychosocial support and the reinforcement of family and community structures.

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