The Role of Parenting in the Proliferation of Street Children: Evidence from River Oli Division, Arua City, Uganda

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Abstract

Street children remain a persistent social and child-protection challenge in many urban areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. This study examined the role of parenting in the proliferation of street children in River Oli Division, Arua City, Uganda. Using a qualitative case-study design, data were collected from 30 street children through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, alongside parents and community leaders. Thematic analysis revealed that inadequate parenting characterized by poverty, neglect, abuse, limited supervision, and weak parent-child bonding significantly contributed to children's transition to street life. Push factors included hunger, poverty, domestic violence, orphan-hood, and mistreatment by caregivers, while pull factors included perceived economic opportunities, peer networks, and relative autonomy on the streets. The study concludes that parenting practices are central to understanding and addressing the street-children phenomenon. Strengthening family-based interventions, community child-protection systems, and parental economic empowerment is critical to reducing children's vulnerability to street life.

Subject Areas

Parenting, Children

Keywords

Parenting, Street Children, Child Protection, Poverty, Uganda

1. Introduction

Street children constitute a vulnerable population whose well-being is shaped by

family, community, and structural factors. Parenting plays a pivotal role in children's physical, emotional, and psycho-social development. In contexts marked by poverty, urbanization, and family breakdown, inadequate parenting has been linked to increased child neglect and street involvement. Uganda continues to face a growing challenge of street-connected children, particularly in urban centers such as Arua City. Despite interventions by government and non-governmental actors, the problem persists, with limited empirical evidence focusing on parenting dynamics at community level. This study therefore examined how parenting practices contribute to the proliferation of street children in River Oli Division, Arua City.

Parenting is the raising of a child or children with particular care, love, and guidance by a parent. It can also be referred to as the process of raising, guiding, and educating a child from birth to adulthood by their mother and father [1]. Parenting plays a pivotal role in the development of children, including their health and mental and psychosocial well-being [1]-[3].

According to the 1995 Constitution of Uganda, a child is a person below the age of 18 years and, therefore, is entitled to the enjoyment of their rights and freedoms as citizens of the country irrespective of their age, race, ethnicity, religion, color, sex, and political or another opinion. Everyone, including parents, teachers, and the Government, is responsible for taking care of children since they are considered the future generation; thus, their welfare should be built on a firm foundation. The study will, therefore, suggest ideas that will help parents to care for their children in terms of feeding, clothing, shelter, medication, and education, among others.

One of the significant consequences of poor parenting is the emergence of the problem of street children or homeless children. This study attempted to understand the contribution parenting makes towards the emergence of street children in the River Oli Division in Arua City.

Not too long ago, in the African tradition, children were either under the care of their biological, foster, or communal parents and were provided for and would be restricted when it came to undertaking some responsibilities, but now, with the current situation where things have changed in all aspects of life and people are hit by the economic crisis upbringing of children has taken a twist. In most families in Sub-Saharan Africa, parenting is now done single-handedly mainly because of single parenthood and family breakages, thus making children's needs not being met by the single parent, making them see the street as the only solution [4]. Meanwhile, as for the case of River Oli, many of the families that have settled there came from other districts like Maracha, Koboko, and Yumbe. Most parents are uneducated and are not employed in the formal sector. Parents leave home early in the morning and return home late at night to fend for their families. The issue of who cares for their children in their absence remains unquestionable. Children are left to stay home all day long without providing for their needs like food, education, medication, and lack of guidance from a biological, foster, or communal

parent, which allows them to do anything they want, thus exposing them to other risks and taking to the streets where they think life will be better for them.

In the African society (Lugbara community), children were for the community. They were cared for by biological, foster, or communal parents who gave them love, care, security protection, and guidance as they transitioned from childhood to adulthood [5]. However, as time passed, because of many challenging situations around the world, poverty being a major one, children now belong to their direct families, and other indirect families do not have control over them even if they are seen engaging in destructive activities. As for the case of River Oli Division, most parents are always not at home because they do petty business to fend for their families, whereby they leave home in the morning and return in the evening, leaving nobody at home to oversee the well-being of their children. So, children get exposed to a toxic environment and eventually indulge in dubious acts.

UNICEF defines a street child as a child living in difficult circumstances, and street children are underrepresented in research. Street children are categorized into two groups: those who have no contact with family or go to their homes rarely and "on the street" children who often sleep at home but spend the day on the streets [6].

About 100 million children are homeless, and this number is on the rise. Most street children are found in lower-income countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa contributing to the lion's share [7]. However, the problem could be more significant in Uganda as the number of street children is undocumented. The study will explore the issue of street children in the West Nile Region, Arua City, and River Oli Division and how the problem is attributed to parenting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reasons for Family Break Up

Existing literature identifies street children as minors for whom the street has become a primary place of residence or livelihood, with limited adult supervision. Studies across Sub-Saharan Africa associate street life with family disintegration, poverty, abuse, and weak parental attachment. Parenting styles particularly permissive and neglectful approaches have been shown to increase children's exposure to antisocial behaviour and street involvement. Push factors such as hunger, domestic violence, and orphan-hood interact with pull factors including income-earning opportunities and peer support networks [8]. However, localized studies examining these dynamics within specific urban communities in Uganda remain limited, justifying the present study.

The breakage of families leaves many children to fend for themselves. Because of the disintegration, leaving home for the streets is on the increase in most urban areas of many towns and cities worldwide [7]. In addition, many homes do not have parents, lack of effective communication between the parents and the children, substance abuse like alcoholism and opium smoking, and domestic violence, thus making children run to the streets to avoid social problems [9].

Most of the parents in the urban areas and slums spend most of their time working all day looking for money to cater to the basic needs of their children, thus making them become deprived of their parent's affection, attention, and even physical presence. This factor also hinders the socialization of the children with their parents making the cultures and norms not to be instilled in the children.

Traumatic events or scenarios like sexual abuse affect the psychological and physiological development of a child with the associated negative effects like confusion, helplessness, hopelessness, self-blame, anger, and feeling unsafe without any protection from the perpetrators or the community members that abuse them [10].

According to [11], parents in developing countries do not have an attachment to their children as soon as they bear them. However, parents are expected to engage themselves in socializing, guiding, and raising their children. It is supposed to be a continuous process until a child reaches 18 years and above, which unfortunately is not a common practice in many parents, which forces children to go to the streets because they do not have any bond with their parents or guardians.

Permissive parents do not give adequate supervision to their children and have no guiding rules, which makes it easy for children to get involved in unwanted social behaviors that they observe, emulate, and adapt to the environment they are living in [12] [13]. Meanwhile, authoritarian and permissive parenting increases the risk of developing antisocial behavior [14].

Dysfunctional family background coupled with risk factors like domestic violence, gender-Based Violence, and child abuse and neglect have made many children like the runaways, orphans, and children who do not have any contact with their parents or primary caregivers leave their homes and run to the streets which exposes them to situations that endangers and threatens their lives as they live on a day-to-day basis [15].

Many parents and caregivers of street children do not support children in providing for their basic needs like food, security, love, shelter, health care, clothing, entertainment, and education. Nevertheless, they are fundamental in the upbringing and well-being of children. Furthermore, a family is a reference point for instilling values and norms which shape their behaviors, character, and personality so that they can be responsible children in their households and community life at large [16].

Ailments in parents, both physical and mental, because of drug and alcohol misuse by fathers, stepfathers, and stepmothers disorganizes family life in many homes and makes children emulate what their parents, yet in turn, parents punish their children who are addicted, making them flee their homes [17].

According to [18], from their studies from Sudan and Ethiopia, large family size has an impact on the economic situation, making the emotional ties family members have for their children to drop, and families that have many children make it hard for them to assume full responsibility for their children. Big families have less time, care, and money for every child, thus making them look at the streets as

an avenue to meet their basic needs.

Maltreatment of children by stepfathers and stepmothers makes children become or end up in the streets—corporal punishment in homes. Physical abuse like beating makes children rebellious, and they will begin thinking of going to the streets to be independent and emancipated from their parents' abusive behavior [18]. [19] also found out in his studies that many forms of violence against children, like physical or mental violence, injury, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, deprivation, and exploitation, including abuse, force children to leave their homes and go on the streets.

Alcoholism disables parents to sufficiently support their children by providing care, love, and adequate supervision. Alcoholic parents usually shout and fight at each other (husband and wife) after drinking, making them impatient with their children, which results in them beating them up for no valid reason. Coupled with this is overcrowding in such families which leads to insufficient or lack of food, poor living conditions, and a lack of emotional and physical comfort for the children [20].

2.2. Factors that Push Children to the Street

There are various push factors that contribute to children becoming street children [21]. Ward and Seager observed that the number of children on the streets reflects the extent of poverty in South Africa. They emphasized that reducing the prevalence of street children requires preventive measures, such as alleviating poverty and providing families with the support they need to raise their children in safe environments. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, abuse, and inadequate parenting are key contributors to the street child phenomenon. Common push factors among street children include abuse, domestic violence, and strained family relationships, which make their home environments unbearable, leading them to seek refuge on the streets. Ward and Seager recommend that parents, communities, society, and the government must make concerted efforts early on to support and nurture children.

Veale and Donà noted that most street children are boys. Their research revealed that the average age of street children in South Africa is around 13 years, and the majority are black males [22]. The predominance of boys on the streets is influenced by socio-cultural factors related to gender. In South Africa, girls are typically expected to care for younger siblings and manage household duties and are less likely to be abandoned when families break apart. Relatives and neighbours are often more willing to take in girls who can help with domestic tasks, whereas boys are seen as less useful in this regard. Veale and Donà also provided an example from Kenya, where boys are encouraged to become independent at a young age, while girls are expected to stay home. Families are also hesitant to send girls to the streets due to fears of sexual abuse and adherence to cultural norms concerning female children.

Street life among children is deeply connected to family dynamics, parental

roles, and community involvement. Many street children come from backgrounds marked by violence, abuse, neglect, and rejection, which leads to their exploitation and estrangement from their families. These adverse conditions often result in children developing aggressive behaviours, delinquency, anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression, ultimately driving them to run away and live on the streets. The sense of hopelessness, worthlessness, and physical and emotional abuse they experience at home compels them to seek a different life on the streets. In Sierra Leone, children born out of wedlock and into poverty are often labelled as illegitimate, making them vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and abandonment [23].

According to Alemona notes parents' divorce is considered a cause of street living among children because structurally the family becomes disrupted. In other instances, divorce occurs when divorced partners enter new marriages, stepfathers or mothers tend to abuse, and the presence of the so-called stepparents increases hatred, love, and care for the children. Thus, children become isolated and traumatized and run on the streets for comfort [24].

Hardships such as unpredictable climatic conditions and unsuitable farming methods persuade many low-income families to migrate to the cities for a better life. However, the urban areas cannot satisfy their needs or meet their expectations, resulting in frustration and poverty. Donald and colleagues add that urbanization concerning insufficient access to proper housing, health, and welfare forces children to go to the streets because parents are dragged to work for long hours with little wages leaving their children unattended to with no care, love, and enough support systems [25].

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the proliferation of street children in River Oli Division, Arua City. An explanatory sequential design was used, beginning with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by qualitative data to further explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings. This approach was chosen to leverage the strengths of both methodologies, offering a more robust analysis than either method could achieve alone [26].

Arua City lies in the Northwestern Corner of Uganda. The Democratic Republic of Congo borders it on the West, the Maracha district in the North, the Terego district in the East, the Arua district, and the Madi Okolo district in the South and Southeast, respectively. The total land area of Arua City is 403.3 Km^2. The distance from the city headquarters to Kampala—Uganda's Capital City—is 520 kilometers. Arua City is the largest commercial and social coordinating point for the entire West Nile Region, DR Congo, and South Sudan bordering countries.

Arua City has two (2) City divisions; Arua Central and Ayivu. The City has three (3) wards and twenty-eight (28) cells. It is also important to note that the city has three constituencies' Arua Central, Ayivu West, and Ayivu East (Arua

City, 2021). The city has a population of 308,851, out of which 145,475 are males and 163,378 females as of the 2014 census. The City's population is projected at 361,400 in 2020, of which 171,800 are males and 189,600 are females [27]. The total number of households is 56,564, and the average household size is 6.4. The cities' average annual population growth rate between 2002 and 2014 is 4.7%. The high population growth rate is because of natural growth due to the high fertility rate and the influx of refugees from South Sudan and DR Congo.

A significant proportion of the population of Arua City is young and, therefore, dependent. This heavily burdens the few productive members of the population because they must look after several other people.

3.1. River Oli Division

River Oli Division is one of the two Divisions of Arua Municipal Council, created by the Act of Parliament. River Oli Division is on latitude 03.10˚ North and longitude 30.58˚ East. It is about 96 kilometers from the Sudan border to the North and about 8 kilometers from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the West. It is 65 kilometers from the banks of the River Nile to the East and 502 kilometers from Kampala, the Capital City of Uganda, with a total land area of 3.12 km² and undulating topography.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with seventy (70) respondents during the entire study. This included, thirty (30) street children, twenty (20) males and ten (10) females aged 7 - 17 years. Three (3) focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with the following groups; fifteen (15) street children, five (10) males and five (5) female, ten (10) parents of children leading street life five (5) males and five (5) females and ten (10) community leaders five (5) females and five (5) males in the three wards of River Oli Division namely Pangisa, Tanganyika and Kenya. The FGDs constituted of 6 - 10 participants. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. Ethical approval was obtained from Gulu University, and informed consent and assent procedures were followed.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics.

Most participants were aged between 14 and 16 years and had not progressed beyond primary education. The majority came from single-parent or guardian-led households, predominantly headed by mothers. This therefore reveals that the nature of the household a child is brought up in single parent (mother only) or guardian-led households is likely to push a child onto the street, in addition more teenagers are seen on the street because of parenting complications, importantly education plays a very important role of keeping children off the streets (See Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic data of respondents.

Variable	Variable Component	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	8	26.7
	Female	22	73.3
Age	7 years	1	3.3
	8 years	2	6.7
	12 years	4	13.3
	13 years	2	6.7
	14 years	7	23.3
	15 years	5	16.7
	16 years	6	20
	17 years	3	10
Level of education	Primary	25	83.3
	Secondary	2	6.7
	No education	3	10
Religion	Muslims	23	76.7
	Catholic	4	13.3
	Protestant	3	10

Source: Field Work, 2023 Arua City, Uganda.

Age

The sample consisted of 30 respondents, with a majority being female. Specifically, 22 respondents (73.3%) were female, while 8 respondents (26.7%) were male. This indicates a higher participation or representation of females in the study, which could reflect either the demographic characteristics of the population being studied or a possible gender-specific interest or availability in participating in the research.

Education

The respondents' ages varied, ranging from 7 to 17 years. The largest age group was 14 years old, comprising 7 respondents (23.3%). This was followed by 16-year-old with 6 respondents (20.0%), and 15-year-old with 5 respondents (16.7%). Other age groups included 12 years (4 respondents, 13.3%), 17 years (3 respondents, 10.0%), 8 years (2 respondents, 6.7%), and 13 years (2 respondents, 6.7%). The smallest group was 7 years old, with only 1 respondent (3.3%). The distribution shows a concentration of respondents in mid-adolescence (14-16 years), which might suggest that these age groups are more accessible or more likely to participate in research studies. The smaller numbers in younger and older age brackets could indicate either a lower population size in these age ranges or less engagement in the study.

Education level

A significant majority of the respondents had completed primary education, accounting for 25 respondents (83.3%). A smaller proportion had completed secondary education, with 2 respondents (6.7%). Additionally, 3 respondents (10.0%) reported having no formal education. This distribution suggests that most respondents have basic education, but there is a notable gap in secondary education attainment. The presence of respondents with no formal education might reflect broader socioeconomic challenges or barriers to accessing education within the population.

4.2. Parenting and Street Involvement

Findings indicated that limited parental supervision, inadequate emotional support, and failure to instil moral values were strongly linked to children's migration to the streets. Many parents lacked time and resources due to economic hardship (See Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents on challenges parents/guidance face in parenting.

Challenges	Percentage (%)
Failure to teach children fundamental moral values	12
Lack of time	35
Lack of trust and understanding	5
Excessive use of gadgets	8
Aggressive behavior of children	25
Judgmental attitudes	10
Environmental influence	5
Total	**100**

Source: Primary data June 2023.

Parents in the community expressed their struggles, saying, *"We want to teach our children good values, but the pressures of daily life and work leave us with little time. It's a constant battle* (Oli, 2023).

The study identified several challenges parents face in raising their children. A significant number of parents (35%) lack adequate time for bonding and instilling moral values due to preoccupation with market activities. This issue is consistent with Crockett and Hayes (2011), who found that parents in developing countries often do not form strong attachments with their children. Experiences of violence and neglect lead 25% of children to exhibit disrespectful and delinquent behaviors. West highlighted that family environments characterized by violence and neglect result in children becoming aggressive and anxious [1]. Additionally, 12% of parents abandon their responsibilities in teaching fundamental moral values, contributing to the rise in street children. Okorodudu and Bandura noted that permissive

parenting without supervision leads to immoral behavior in children. Parents also struggle with children's judgmental attitudes (10%) and excessive use of gadgets (8%), often stolen and used without parental control [12] [13].

4.3. Push and Pull Factors

Key push factors included poverty, hunger, abuse, domestic violence, and orphanhood. Pull factors included income-earning activities such as scrap collection, informal labour, and peer influence, which provided a sense of belonging and autonomy (See Table 3).

Table 3. Reasons that forced street children out of homes for self-surviving.

Reasons	Percent
Poverty	27.3%
Hunger	27.3%
Mistreatment from stepfather/Mother	5.5%
No one took care of me	3.6%
Abuse at home	14.5%
Domestic Violence	7.3%
Being orphaned	10.9%
Not enough room space at home	1.8%
Night Clubs	1.8%
Total	**100.0%**

Source: Primary data June 2023.

Understanding why children move to the streets is crucial for developing effective interventions. The study identified several push factors: poverty (27.3%), hunger (27.3%), abuse (14.5%), orphanhood (10.9%), and mistreatment by stepparents (5.5%). Many street children came from families where parents or caregivers lacked stable, well-paying jobs, resulting in insufficient food and necessities. Ward and Seager (2010) found similar correlations between poverty and street life. In polygamous families with limited resources, children often sought food through hard labor in restaurants. Schaefer noted that unmet basic needs like food and shelter are fundamental drivers of children leaving home [16]. Physical and emotional abuse at home forced many children to seek peace on the streets. Ofonedu and colleagues reported that traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse significantly affected children's psychological development [10]. The absence of functional family systems and guardianship made orphans vulnerable to street life. Marianne and colleagues observed that orphans are often exposed to dangerous street environments [15]. Physical and corporal punishment by stepfathers or stepmothers drives children to seek independence on the streets. This finding aligns with Boakye and MOLSA, who documented various forms of violence leading to children becoming street dwellers [18] [19].

5. Discussion

The findings align with previous studies highlighting family dysfunction and economic deprivation as drivers of street life. Adolescents aged 14 - 16 years were particularly vulnerable due to developmental transitions requiring increased parental guidance. The predominance of single-parent households underscores the need for targeted support to caregivers. Parenting practices emerged as both a risk and protective factor, reinforcing the importance of family-centred interventions. Focus Group Discussions with community leaders, parents, and street children suggested several strategies for improving child upbringing. Community sensitization, led by the government, should educate families and communities on children's rights and needs. This approach should involve collaboration with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Faith-based Organisations (FBOs), educational institutions, and the wider community. Strengthening child protection systems by training local leaders, police, and child protection committees to monitor street children and support their resettlement is essential. Practical skills training suited to individual interests, such as music, art, tailoring, and mechanics, will enhance street children's employability. Empowering families through training on practical parenting skills, financial literacy, and forming savings associations can improve livelihoods and meet children's needs. Sensitizing couples on sexual and reproductive health rights will help manage family size and ensure adequate provision for children. Government and NGOs should also educate parents on their responsibilities in child upbringing, including discipline within expected limits. These strategies, aligned with findings from various studies, emphasize the collective effort required to effectively address the street children phenomenon.

6. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that inadequate parenting significantly contributes to the proliferation of street children in River Oli Division. Addressing the problem requires holistic approaches that strengthen parenting skills, improve household economic security, and reinforce community child-protection mechanisms.

Street living is not a choice, but various circumstances like poverty, hunger, being orphaned, and mistreatment from parents/caretakers. However, a few force children out of homes for street living, and when children are out of home, they will not attain education, have no proper shelter, lack medical care and attention, and have no food.

Parents need more time to look after their children, and they are always on the move in markets doing petty business and other casual work, which causes children to miss stages of moral virtues that they should learn from their parents. The environment also influences the children; for example, the slum area of River Oli Division is characterized by poverty and thus has worse policing conditions than other well-to-do residences.

Lack of family planning among many couples in River Oli Division, the place

being a predominantly Muslim community, and their Quranic belief of marrying more than two wives leads to producing many children which they cannot afford to care for their basic needs, some of which led to children leaving home for their fending. The lack of local ordinances in the River Oli Division for child protection, which could regulate child abuse, neglect by the parents/caretakers and the community at large, and idleness by the children, have immensely contributed to increased street living.

High poverty levels among most parents and caretakers in River Oli Division incapacitate them to provide for their children's basic needs.

7. Recommendations

The Community Service Department of the City should create platforms and structures for child protection and referral pathways in the community to conduct monitoring of abuse and neglect of children in families and report to the relevant authorities such as the Probation Department and Civil Society Organizations with direct interventions in Child Protection and Safeguarding.

The Government and other stakeholders should also prioritize investment in programs that can identify and skill the street children in life skills for them to compete in the labor market and be productive, as well as investing in Orphanage centers where street children are taken at early stages to instill moral values and education.

Civil Society Organizations and the Government should conduct regular community dialogues and sensitization meetings on child protection, safeguarding, and upbringing. The city's health department's community outreach on family planning encourages couples to have manageable family sizes that they can afford to meet their children's basic needs and education.

Community service departments and CSOs should train local leaders on child safeguarding and protection.

The Government of Uganda and other stakeholders like UNICEF should invest in constructing children-centered remand homes to keep the growing numbers of street children.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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