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**To cite this article:** Lorraine van Blerk, Janine Hunter, Wayne Shand, Badru Bukenya, Lucy Jamieson & Linda Theron (29 May 2026): Conceptualising street youth lived resilience in African cities, *Children's Geographies*, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2026.2673859](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2026.2673859)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2026.2673859>



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Published online: 29 May 2026.



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## Conceptualising street youth lived resilience in African cities

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### ABSTRACT

Youth, embedded in street life in African cities, experience multiple daily and longer-term stressors which impact their socio-economic circumstances and capacities to meet their basic needs. Urban contexts of high unemployment, inequality, and poverty result in homeless youth, often with incomplete schooling, unable to secure a decent living through hustling in the informal economy, access safe spaces to sleep, nutritious food, and subject to violence or arrest. Yet, street youth are resilient, employing creative tactics to overcome challenges and build strategies for life endurance. This paper draws on 18 focus groups with 199 young people living on the streets in three diverse African cities to explore the nuances of their resilience. When exposed to significant stress, street youth mobilise relational, institutional, and contextual resources to be resilient. The paper, therefore, conceptualises resilience as a lived process that goes beyond traditional understandings of personal resilience, over space and time. Street youth 'lived resiliencies' are grounded in the social and economic fabric of cities and are deployed to overcome multiple difficulties. The paper concludes by translating co-responsibility for street youth lived resiliencies towards policy and practice communities.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 October 2025  
Accepted 10 April 2026

### KEYWORDS

Resilience; Lived experience;  
Street youth; African cities

## Introduction

Recent times have seen multiple stressors impacting young people's life experiences globally and creating challenging contexts for growing up. Heightened awareness of climate change has created future anxiety for many young people (Haynes and Tanner 2015; Hickman et al. 2021), while global lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in missed schooling, reduced opportunities for employment and training and exposure to violence and isolation (Bell et al. 2023; Zougheibe et al. 2024). Economic austerity has plunged more young people into poverty globally, and conflicts in areas such as Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Gaza are increasing forced displacement in already stressed regions (Barford 2025; Seymour 2012). Within these global contexts of crisis, specificities emerge that foster unique situations and challenges. Across the African continent, where youth populations are projected to double to over 830 million by 2050 (Bekele-Thomas and Westgaard 2024), high rates of un- and under-employment are coupled with burgeoning informal

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economy activity and complex life trajectories. Within these cities, growing youth populations may appear trapped, waiting to access desired formal employment or education opportunities (Ibid.); resulting in some spiralling into moments of despair and lacking hope for the future (Ungruhe and Esson 2017) or, as for street youth, engaging in continuous daily hustle on the streets (Thieme 2018; van Blerk, Hunter, and Shand 2024a). These divergent temporalities of growing up, whether prolonged and stretched out or sharpened in a staccato focus of day-to-day survival, suggest that young people employ strategies that enable resilience in the present and in creating viable futures.

This paper focuses specifically on street youth (aged 15–24) in three African cities to better understand their resilience as a lived experience. As young people experiencing sustained marginalisation, failing to access support services due to their age, homeless status, lack of formal identity documents and curtailed education (see, for example, Poretti et al. 2014), street youth experience multiple daily and longer-term stressors. These impact their capacities to meet their basic needs, often in the informal economy, on the margins of legality and even threaten their survival. Their experience of poverty, lack of access to basic services and excluded social position make resilience both a necessary asset (Malindi and Theron 2010) and a metaphor for lives lived on the streets, where creative strategies are necessary for daily life endurance. However, beyond use of resilience as a short-hand for surviving the risks and complexity of urban life, it also offers an analytic lens to contextualise the temporal, economic and social systems that condition the possible responses available to individuals. Resilience, like agency (see Bordonaro and Payne 2012), is, in this sense, normatively neither good nor bad (Bene et al. 2014), but a situated capability employed to respond to adversity, positioned within broader contexts that contribute or detract from personal resilience.

The conceptualisation of resilience, as the capacity to function adaptively in contexts of significant stress exposure (Masten 2014), has until recently been considered in research as an individual, internal characteristic that is drawn upon (or not) in difficult times (Malindi and Theron 2010; Seymour 2012). Although importantly positioning street youth as experts on their own lives, with capacities and agency to make decisions, albeit in constrained ways (Dankyi et al. 2024), a focus on individual resilience may mask the complexity of life on the streets and therefore how street young people may best be supported. A focus on individual resilience also obscures the complexity of resources going beyond personal characteristics which street youth draw on, including wider social relations in street contexts (Masten, Tyrell, and Cicchetti 2023; Ungar and Theron 2020).

To explore how resilience can be employed as an analytic lens for the lives of street young people, this paper draws on focus group data from the Growing Up on the Streets research project to explore how resilience is shaped in different situations and contexts. Growing Up on the Streets was a longitudinal participatory project that explored the capabilities of street youth across three years, spanning 2012–2016. Participants defined ten capabilities on the street, one of which was their personal resilience. Capabilities as a concept can be used to both consider ‘inputs’ into young people’s ‘means to achieve’ lives of value and dignity while recognising influences of societal structures and constraints that can act to delimit personal capabilities, including resilience (Chikoko et al. 2024). This paper connects the concepts of capabilities and resilience by conceptualising resilience as a lived experience where relational, temporal, and spatial capacities are engaged in a blend of lived resilience that is specific to street contexts. While highlighting the resilience strategies young people employ on a daily basis, and recognising their capabilities to overcome significant stress, the paper conceptualises resilience on the streets as a lived experience which must be contextualised and embedded within the relations, functions, and spatiality of street life. Grounded in the experiences of growing up on the streets of Accra, Ghana; Bukavu, DRC and Harare, Zimbabwe discussion in the paper focuses on resilience as a situated, complex capability enabling street youth to manage in contexts where there are multiple constraints on their personal resilience. Using this dynamic and interconnected conceptualisation of lived resilience, the paper explores the implications for how we understand and support young people growing up on the streets.

To achieve this, the paper is structured as follows. A brief overview of conceptualisations of resilience, now recognising connections to temporal, spatial, and social influences upon personal

resilience, is followed by an explanation of the Growing up on the Streets project. Accounts from street youth follow, expressing characteristics of street resilience as young people meet their basic daily needs, experience violence, and access livelihoods. The paper then proposes a shift to consider the 'lived resiliencies' of street youth beyond the personal, shaped by space, time, and relationships. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting ways in which conceptualisations of lived resiliencies, combined with multisystemic resources across multiple systems, have the potential to create positive outcomes for street youth.

### Conceptualising resilience on the streets

Much of the literature engaging with street children and youth since the 1990s has also engaged with the sociology of childhood and the drive to recognise young people's agency, including their right to 'be' in public space (Stoecklin et al. 2023). Cities, as sites of resistance and mobilisation (Butler 2016), provide the context for street young people's mobilities and livelihoods. The fabric of urban space is conceptualised as essential to resistance to patriarchal and societal norms and a tool of survival, as young people carve out spaces for themselves in the city (Beazley 2002; Butler 2016; Langevang 2008; van Blerk 2005; Young 2003). Street young people have agentially claimed the right to be positioned in street contexts (Aytaç 2021; van Daalen 2016), with the street as an urban setting for livelihoods, social and relational interactions, sometimes despite state efforts to remove them (Ongowo, Ngetich, and Murenga 2021).

Often positioned as antonymic to vulnerability, resilience was traditionally understood as personal and later relational (Ali 2011; Masten 2014). Perspectives expanding on this focus highlight multidimensional drivers and inhibitors of resilience embedded in cultural, structural and environmental experiences, reconceptualised as multisystemic resilience (Masten, Tyrell, and Cicchetti 2023; Ungar and Theron 2020). Resilience is also temporal, with responses at differing tempos, in response to shocks and chronic situations of poverty and marginalisation (Masten 2014). In other words, resilience incorporates personal responses, such as agency, but contributes to, and is supported by, structural, cultural and relational factors (Theron 2023); the distinct nature of resilience in African countries (Ibid.) is indicative of the role of culture in resilience. Relationships with partners (Hunter, this volume) and with organisations (Oppong Asante 2019) are also contributors to resilience and suggest a temporal endurance beyond resistance to negative interventions.

However, experiences, such as state-sanctioned roundups (Ongowo, Ngetich, and Murenga 2021), human, structural or climatic events (Amankwaa and Gough 2023), can acutely impinge on the lives of street young people, highlighting the limits of personal agency, resistance and resilience for living within street contexts. Placing young people, including those living in street situations, within systems that support them or recognising when these systems hinder or stifle their personal resilience, recognises multisystemic influences on personal resilience and the importance of multisystemic approaches (McCay et al. 2010; Panter-Brick 2023).

This paper focuses on African street youth responses in contexts where there is a paucity of resilient-enabling systems, and where relational, spatial and temporal supports contribute where systems fail. The rest of this paper explains the research methodology with street youth and their identification of resilience as a key factor in their lives. Their characterisation of resilience becomes evident on account of meeting their daily needs, experiences of violence and harm, and in their livelihood strategies. Beyond these accounts of personal resilience, the relational, spatial and temporal contributors to experiences of resilience are then explored as lived resiliencies, and the need to take forward conceptualisations of street young people's resilience into a multidimensional sphere.

### Methodology

This paper draws on empirical data collected as part of the Growing Up on the Streets (GUOTS) research project. GUOTS aimed to understand the lived experiences of young people growing up

on the streets in African cities (van Blerk, Shand, and Shanahan 2015) to inform policy processes. The research employed a capability approach, adapted from the works of Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011), shifting the focus from young people as vulnerable and lacking agency on the streets, to elucidate their capacities and capabilities as they grow up in situations of vulnerability and challenge. Further, GUOTS participatory methodology was co-produced with street youth, enabling their influence and expertise to inform critical areas of focus important to their lived experiences (van Blerk, Shand, and Shanahan 2015). A pilot phase facilitated a co-created approach to ethnographic data collection by street youth researchers. Following discussions with street youth in Harare, Zimbabwe and Accra, Ghana, a capabilities framework was co-produced and applied to the research. This framework comprised ten key capabilities, including aspects of accessing basic and livelihood needs, relationships to people and place, as well as aspects of health and well-being. Of relevance to this paper, resilience was also one of the ten themes identified by young people as critically important in their street lives.

GUOTS took place in three African cities, chosen for their diverse urban contexts for street youth, including the formalised city centre in Harare, Zimbabwe; the sprawling, busy informal environments of Accra, Ghana, and Bukavu, DRC, with access to different informal livelihoods due to its location on the shores of Lake Kivu. In Bukavu, an additional pressure for street youth was the continued threat of insurgency from M23 rebel groups operating in the surrounding area (Hatem 2025). These contexts shaped the make-up of street youth populations: Accra had an even gender balance and mixing; Bukavu a smaller, separate 'girls' group' (at their request) comprising 24% of participants, while in Harare, street youth were majority male with a smaller number of girls and young women participating (12%). Bukavu also differed contextually, being predominantly Catholic, using French as the official language, with participants using Swahili, in contrast to Harare and Accra, where English was the official language, with participants speaking chiefly Shona in Harare, and English and Twi (sometimes Ga, or Ewe) in Accra.

In each city, potential street youth researchers were introduced to the project by local NGO partners who were known to them through their street outreach work. Following intensive research training on methods, ethics and knowledge exchange, six homeless street youth in each city (18 in total) were engaged as ethnographic researchers on a part-time basis, supported by a trusted street worker project manager, to undertake research. They identified a close network of approximately ten peers, each of whom took part in research activities covering aspects of street life and their capabilities within it. All young people engaging at any point received payment as recompense for their time as well as food and drink; this was important as most participants were reliant on their own informal livelihood strategies, such as street selling, to meet their daily needs. The empirical data comprised weekly qualitative ethnographic reports on the lives of each group using the capability framework. In addition, 198 in-depth focus group discussions were undertaken covering the 10 capabilities (including an additional set on rights) for all 18 per groups. These mixed-gender focus groups (except the 'girl s' group' in Bukavu) each shared a framework of questions that were common across the three cities, which loosely guided the discussions on each capability. Each focus group was formed by up to 12 network members and co-facilitated by the group's street youth researcher and the country-level street worker project managers, while members of the international research team were also present and able to ask and answer questions and discuss topics. Facilitators were careful to ensure all voices were heard in focus group discussions, as groups were of mixed ages and genders. Verbal informed consent, as part of a comprehensive ethical process<sup>1</sup>, was requested and recorded at the start of each focus group with all participants in attendance. This process covered issues beyond consent, including confidentiality, anonymity, and safety. Ethical review was repeated with each network for every quarterly focus group across three years, ensuring a rolling process of ethical engagement and consent as participants grew up and continued to engage with the project. This paper specifically draws on the 18 focus groups (six in each of the three cities) centred on resilience involving 199 street youth, aged between 15

and 24. These focus groups were recorded and later transcribed, translated and anonymised for further analysis using NVivo, where a capability coding framework, incorporating over 60 sub-codes, was used for the analysis of all data.

### Characteristics of street youth resilience

Street youth in all three cities face numerous challenges in their daily lives. The data reveal street youth identified with the concept of resilience as a personal reserve, drawing on their individual capacities and capabilities to find solutions that ease their situation, even for a brief period. In Bukavu, street youth often use the term '*kaza roho*', which in literal translation means to 'tighten the heart', referring to the inner strength needed to overcome difficulties and emotions. They qualify this, indicating that, as individuals, they have 'to take courage and harden the heart to endure whatever will happen to you' (Bukavu Group 4). Similarly, in Accra, youth indicate that resilience is linked to determination: 'I don't think I will ever regret; whatever will come my way, I will have to face it' (Accra Group 4). Phrases such as these reinforce the perception that resilience is something internal, used to resist or recover from external forces that they cannot avoid. Yet, each street young person is also unique with multiple intersectional characteristics, such as gender, race, age, body size and shape, and a suite of learned skills, attributes and networks, which add to their armoury of resilience. Their personhood may then be applied in a variety of ways to any given situation, shaping their responses. However, the complexity of their uniqueness is often masked in the literature that highlights personal resilience as a generic survival skill on the streets.

The following sub-sections delve into the data to expand understanding of the complexities of street youth's daily lives from a personal resilience perspective. In the varied and contrasting ways they respond to everyday encounters, street young people show malleability, adaptability and creativity in their strategies and actions to solve problems. Their resilience is shown to be more than a personal capacity, being typically complemented by resources in their physical environment and social networks. Each sub-section below focuses on expressions of resilience in facing specific challenges around critical situations of risk on the streets: exploring meeting basic needs, avoiding violence and harm, and accessing livelihood opportunities. The data reveal the complexity of street youth resilient responses.

### *Expressions of resilience in experiences of meeting daily basic needs*

Street youth focus daily on accessing food and shelter as key components of meeting their basic needs when living and working on the streets. According to Harare Group 1: 'the first skill I know of is knowing where to get your food to eat'. A myriad of strategies are employed to find sustenance, which include purchasing cheap food when money is available, or stealing food if not, eating leftovers, scavenging for food from bins, and cooking food. Street youth accumulate knowledge of where to find discarded food and the best times of the day to visit bins (see also Young 2003, for a discussion of these basic needs survival strategies in Uganda).

In meeting their daily needs, street youth draw on a wide range of physical and psychological resources. Livelihoods include selling, requiring communication skills, perseverance to stand on the streets for long periods, and knowledge of what to sell, where, and at what time. Stealing requires courage, nimble fingers and astute skills in assessing who to steal from.

Earning money enables street youth to find shelter, for example, in Accra and Bukavu, renting a kiosk in an informal settlement for varied amounts of time. In Harare, informal structures are forbidden, and their removal is enforced. However, renting a kiosk is also risky, as its construction may be illegal and transitory. They are flimsy and subject to environmental hazards, which can destroy them quickly. Street youth weigh up the risks and benefits of renting and apply their physical capacities and perseverance when tragedy hits. In Accra, young people describe the challenge of

losing their possessions, including food and cooking utensils, due to fires, flood or demolition. Under these circumstances, they must quickly gather their possessions and move to a new location, often a street, market or railway platform to sleep. An Accra participant described their resilience at the loss of their home:

I tried my best to be able to rent a kiosk so that I can buy things for myself and keep them there. When I built the kiosk less than one month later it was demolished because the land belonged to the government. [...] in all those situations I still didn't give up (Group 4).

In some circumstances, the realities of meeting basic needs of food and shelter result in drug-taking to block out the cold or hunger, or engage in risky activities such as sex work, begging and stealing, where informal livelihood strategies are unavailable or have failed to provide. Street youth do not give up but adapt plans to meet their needs, dependent on the changing context and realities on the streets.

Further, in both Bukavu and Accra, there is a gendered dimension to resilience in response to a lack of shelter. Girls and young women seek structures to sleep in for safety and protection for themselves from threats of sexual exploitation and violence, and to protect their children from harsh elements of weather such as rain and cold. A young woman explained, 'when you should sleep outside with the baby; he can get cold and even fall sick' (Accra Group 4). In Harare, fewer girls are present on the streets as kiosks are only available in distant suburbs; girls make constrained choices, entering concurrent relationships with different boyfriends across locations, to avoid sexual violence.

### *Expressions of resilience in experiences of violence and harm*

Personal resilience can be considered a mechanism for tolerating violence and harm on the streets (Oppong Asante 2019). The strategies young people employ can be extremely varied, indicating that resilience is more than a single attribute but a complex process of choices between available 'resilience-enablers' which may be 'relational, personal, structural, cultural and/or spiritual.' (Theron 2023, 1031).

For some, strategies to avoid harm, often following an activity such as stealing or begging, can be practical, physical and spatial, such as removing oneself from the vicinity to an alternative, usually concealed place, where they are less likely to be found. In Harare, a young man commented, 'when I see the problem coming, I will hide.' (Harare Group 1).

Yet it is not always as simple as utilising physical capacities to execute a hiding plan. A young man in Accra identified psychological impacts: 'when I get into trouble, I can't sleep, so I will go to my video centre and play some games, and I will forget my problems' (Accra Group 4). His response is to choose a hiding place where he can distract his mind.

Physical and psychological attributes may be melded in alternative but unique ways as part of escape strategies for avoiding harm and violence. For example, rather than combining physical athletic capacities to run away and find the perfect hiding place, with mental capacities of distraction, communication skills may be used to talk themselves out of situations, and at the same time relying on a street young person's physical appearance, being child-like, or impoverished, to engage sympathy or pity. As one young man put it, 'You must be able to talk and socialize with other people.' (Harare Group 3). A young man in Accra explained how he adopts different tactics when arrested: 'I can talk to the [police] over the counter I will tell him I have some money there, so I will ask him how much they will need to bail me, or I will tell him I don't have any family member here'. (Accra, Group 4).

Engaging in petty theft is often used as a justification by law enforcement agencies for disrupting the informal work of street youth. In Harare, a participant explained how his usual informal work of guarding cars was interrupted by police, and 'during that time you cannot look for money; and if you have a baby, maybe someone can come and feel pity on the baby.' (Group 5). Girls and young

women in Bukavu, when confronted by unscrupulous police, frequently had no choice but to offer sex in exchange for avoiding arrest or being released from detention. One young woman (Group 6) said: 'To be resilient and to support it, you must only let them have sex and then you can be free.'

These examples illustrate the application of psychological and physical strategies to avoid further exposure to violence, with constrained resilience strategies including assessing situations and opting to 'give in' to perpetrators. A Bukavu participant discusses his experience of being robbed: 'I came across older boys who were stronger than me and who 'ate' my 4,500 Francs [£2.20]. [...] I decided not to trouble them because they were stronger than me and I could struggle to get some other 4,500 Francs through my sweat' (Group 2). In this case, the speaker claims agency over the decision to 'struggle' to replace the money rather than risk violence; it was better to hand over the money than resist or run away.

Juxtaposed with these examples of resilience strategies to avoid violence, there is an underlying sense of situational vulnerability for street youth, which can result in additional harm or even death. Resilient strategies adopted to avoid harm in the short-term may cause ongoing issues; for example, sex work and sexual violence result in sexually transmitted infections, mental disturbance and ill-health, which can instigate a recurring negative cycle of coping strategies. Handing over money in a robbery is also not a guarantee that perpetrators will not inflict violence. Resilient acts can spiral to negative behaviours such as substance use, in situations where young people have few choices available: 'if I have too many problems, I will smoke drugs and sleep not to think about the problems. Tomorrow, when I get sober, I will start again' (Harare Group 6).

### *Expressions of resilience in accessing livelihood opportunities*

Accessing livelihoods to have enough money to eat, sleep safely, and cover basic needs is an ongoing daily struggle fraught with challenges. Younger boys and girls are more likely to beg; age and appearance can support some young people to be successful street beggars, as they are able to position themselves as 'vulnerable' and receive empathetic responses from passers-by due to their appearance.

For youth who sell on the streets, the lack of identity documents and permits places them at risk of having their livelihoods disrupted by authorities enforcing street-selling laws. One young man explains he risks having his wares confiscated: 'I am selling my discs, and the piracy-police will come, catch me, take my stuff, and leave me with a few items. [...] I am persevering such that I will continue to sell and not beg.' (Harare Group 1). For him, resilience is about having enough to survive on the streets, but also within a cultural context of taking pride in his livelihood activities, without structural support for informal livelihoods. Begging is often viewed with disdain, especially as street young people age and develop the physical capacities of adults. In this example, psychological perseverance is not only related to making money, but to achieving a livelihood through means that maintain dignity, rather than resorting to begging. Therefore, resilience means not only persisting but doing so when choices are hard: 'you cannot persevere in an easy situation. When things are difficult, that is when you persevere' (Harare Group 1).

Resilience is also drawn upon when livelihood options are scarce, and the unique individualities of street youth and their intersectional nature mean resilience manifests in different ways. Girls and young women are more likely to engage in sex work as a strategy to make money when other options are unavailable, despite posing significant risks to their health and well-being. A young woman in Harare complained that 'the man that you will be with can infect you' and given gender disparities in earnings and the cost of treatment, 'he will go alone to get treatment, and you, as the girl, will continue being ill.' (Harare Group 6). For all street youth, good communication skills that can be used in different contexts for their benefit are important. Young women and girls draw on their physical attributes to attract clients, as well as their skills of persuasion and negotiation to protect themselves as best as possible. Others resort to stealing as an alternative; in Bukavu, one girl

described how she ‘may use my own intelligence: when they are all asleep, I can steal from them and get additional money.’ (Group 6).

Individual capacity also emerges as important, as some young people indicate that they struggle with stealing, especially if it involves inflicting harm on others. Those whose internal characteristics mean they fear or dislike stealing may take drugs to boost courage in such situations: ‘If I go shocking [stealing] and see that there is something left out and ‘ill-kept’, I must first of all drug myself to have the courage to go and take it.’ (Bukavu Group 3). Street youth blend skills and strategies to resiliently respond in situations that test their personal and situational capacities.

These extracts and exemplars elucidate the complexity of personal resilience responses to risks faced on the streets across key areas of daily life. The intersection of specific characteristics, such as age and gender, highlights how young people respond differently when faced with similar challenges. Challenges are constant, varying, and ongoing, and resilience is central to their daily lived experiences, not a resource kept for rare situations of extreme need. For street youth, these situations are regular, embedded and a normative condition of life on the streets. This means that for street youth, resilience is a daily experience of lived resiliencies constituting everyday occurrences of risks which position young people in situations of adversity. They respond through applying resilient strategies that are adaptable, malleable and shaped by context, situation and intersectionality.

### **Beyond the personal, in street youth lived resiliencies**

The previous section focused on personal aspects of resilience, demonstrating how individuals’ context and characteristics influence situations in which young people experience risk and apply resilient strategies. The section revealed complexities of responses and a myriad of coping strategies consisting of personal, physical and psychological attributes that in turn help determine diverse resilient outcomes. Their ongoing daily resilience is conceptualised here as *lived resiliencies*, which shape and are shaped by their life experience on the streets. Yet, GUOTS data also reveals that personal characteristics are not applied in isolation to these lived resiliencies, as street life is also relational, spatial and temporal. This section expands the notion of lived resiliencies, beyond individual coping, to examine how resilient strategies are enacted within the wider contextual street communities and environments.

#### ***Relational lived resiliencies***

When resilience is viewed at an individual level, it ignores relational interactions between individuals for resilience to be achieved. The paper has acknowledged that earlier work with street children and youth sought to recognise their agency and capabilities, encouraging their voices to be included in decisions about their lives, counteracting the rhetoric of young people on the streets as only vulnerable. As Dankyi et al. (2024) show, street young people’s lives are complex, enmeshed within an agency–vulnerability nexus, which finds them located within mutable risky and vulnerable situations, where they enact an agentic resilience. This complexity extends beyond personal resilience, as street youth engage in relationships with peers, community members, family, state agents and others, and their resilience is shaped by these interactions.

GUOTS data focused on peer groups as the unit of analysis, acknowledging that street youth are interconnected. Many of their daily life experiences are carried out in collaboration with others, and evidence how relationships strengthen their lived resiliencies. Although young people indicated that they are responsible for meeting their own basic needs, many of the ways in which they overcome risk are by working together. As a participant explains: ‘when I get into trouble or get into hardship, my friends do advise me what I should do to help myself’ (Accra, Group 7).

Camaraderie on the streets emerges, in part, from experiencing comparable circumstances. Bonds of friendship are sustained through experiencing daily life together: their lived resiliencies

are shared with others. Street youth provide both emotional and practical support in times of distress and hardship. In Bukavu, strong networks are important for overcoming the difficulties of meeting basic needs if arrested, imprisoned or simply detained in police cells: 'if you were in good terms with your friends, they are the ones who can bring you an avocado with a slice of bread, or bring you a cigarette if you smoke' (Bukavu Group 1).

In a similar vein, risks to food and shelter access reveal how young people share food when it is scarce, purchase food to cook together to reduce costs, and support one another, sharing information around how to access scavenged food from bins. Street young people across all three cities more often sleep communally for protection from harm, warmth, and to share coverings. Even in instances where they rent kiosks, this is in partnership with others to reduce costs and maintain the kiosk for longer. In Accra, a participant explained how she and friends decided to club together: 'I didn't have any sleeping place, I also didn't have money for food. Where we sleep, too, when it rains, the roof leaks. So, my friends and I decided to go and rent a kiosk and stay there.' (Group 7).

These relations extend beyond mutual benefit as they will help each other when facing adversity as part of successful lived resiliencies. For example, in Accra, several informal areas were affected by fires and floods at different times. One girl commented that the street youth researcher Sarah had supported her by giving her a dress; 'when my things got burnt, I didn't have any dress to wear after bathing'. Another young woman added: 'This is my friend; she gives me all the support I may need, and I also do the same for her.' (Accra Group 3).

While peers are a key support in street youth lived resiliencies, and form part of their networks of resilience, street young people also enlist the help of others. For example, Bukavu boys talked about giving their money to 'confidant' market women to look after for them, to avoid losing it in a street robbery, and they receive food from the women when in situations of desperate need (see also Hlabana, van Blerk, and Hunter 2021). Similarly, in Accra, street youth may receive support from 'senior men' at railways who stand up for younger ones if they are being troubled, and in Harare, older street youth, called 'giants', protect 'youngsters': 'if they come to steal our money, we will just tell our giants. Our giants do not want to see us being harassed.' (Harare Group 3). In Bukavu, a group member described advising younger newcomers 'to return home' as 'it is no use coming to the street and experience the cold, slaps, whips and punches.' (Group 2).

However, street youth lived resiliencies are constrained by street circumstances, which may sometimes lead to practices and choices which are misinformed or harmful to health and well-being. This can occur if peer or community support, in the form of advice, encourages engagement in unsafe and dangerous activities such as street abortions to end pregnancy (see Hunter, van Blerk, and Shand 2021) or drug taking to cope with the pain of sleeping when cold or hungry: 'I must first take a half-bottle of 'simba' [strong beer] and a small ball of weed to take away the coldness.' (Bukavu Group 2). Resilience under these conditions is certainly supported by social networks that help to boost individual psychological strength in the short-term, but with potential longer-term negative implications.

Beyond street-living communities, lived resiliencies are intermeshed with the actions of, and interactions with, others in the wider community. Livelihood strategies often involve employers or customers, demonstrating a relational resilience that comes through fleeting or regular interactions that enable young people to make money or maintain their basic needs. Churches, NGOs, and street workers often featured in their discussions as trusted adults who provide advice, but also facilitate access to resources such as food, clothes, blankets and washing facilities. A young woman in Accra recounted: 'When things became hard, when I was pregnant with my first son ... [NGO worker] took me to the hospital and took care of all my bills.' (Accra Group 2).

Relationships with state agents are more complex and rarely supportive. Police, and sometimes other state agents such as the army, are discussed as both drivers of risk and as support networks.

Bukavu girls and young women mention that walking alone or in pairs at night can make them vulnerable to sexual violence, where often the police are positioned as perpetrators: ‘even the police, who are supposed to protect people, rape you.’ (Bukavu Group 6). This leads to a further aspect of street youth lived resiliencies, which situates these relations within space and time.

### *Spatial and temporal lived resiliencies*

The daily rhythms and relations of street life are played out in space and time (Thieme 2018; Young 2003) and lived resiliencies are also spatial and temporal. Examples above around relational lived resiliencies, also demonstrate how temporal shifts between day and night can produce different impacts and outcomes for street youth, with acts of violence, robbery and other harms more often occurring in darkness. Night-time also has specific implications for girls and young women due to their greater risk of sexual violence. For example, in Bukavu, they may choose to sleep inside bars rather than walk back to their kiosk at night to avoid any potential risk of rape. A girl recounted that her ‘difficulties are related to the police who, once they catch me at night, they put me in a ditch, rape me and leave me there’ (Bukavu Group 6). Without the community presence of daytime activities, girls and young women are more situationally vulnerable due to temporal risks. In these times, street youth resilience is strained, and their strategies may be modified due to changes in risk level or type.

Street young people in Harare use film halls to sleep in to avoid harassment on the streets at night (see also van Blerk, Hunter, and Shand 2024b). In Accra, night-time can also be a time of opportunity, as a young man recounted how ‘one driver told me he didn’t have a license and he works at night [...] so I should come and I work with him as a driver’s assistant, and I said OK.’ (Group 5).

Longer duration temporal cycles of street life also shape lived resiliencies, as those newer to street life are coached and helped to adapt by those who have spent longer periods on the streets. They are taught how to live, where to access resources, as well as how to deepen their personal resolve to endure hardship and violence they may hitherto be unaccustomed to. This includes being subject to rape: ‘There are some that started the street life before me. I just used to follow them and saw how they were treated, and I followed all what they were doing. If it’s rape, I must endure it’ (Bukavu Group 6). Or eating waste food: ‘I teach him the place where he can bath and also be able to get into a bin and pick food because some may be shy to pick food’ (Harare, Group 4). Although peers support each other to adapt to street life (space), they also encourage those new to the streets (time) to endure practices that facilitate their staying on the streets through unsafe and dangerous acts. These may produce a negative form of personal resilience in moments of daily survival, but with significant long-term consequences for physical and mental health.

While older peers act as role models and give advice to younger peers, these examples illustrate the constrained nature of lived resilience on the streets, as young people are marginalised both temporally and spatially. The fractured nature of being homeless means that many domestic activities are carried out across street spaces. The variety of spaces used for cooking, washing, sleeping and other basic needs functions varies from city to city but includes rivers, lakes, alleyways, film halls, markets, and fields. These marginal spaces in cities are juxtaposed with busier street spaces where street young people draw on the nature of urban environments, as places where the public congregate and pass through, for livelihoods that include selling, begging, stealing, and providing services. Such livelihoods are relational, relying on others, as well as spatial and temporal, taking place at specific places and times. Street youth observe the spatial and temporal events and learn patience and hope. An Accra participant, for example, said that: ‘one thing that gives me encouragement is that, when [the market] got burnt, they brought machines to clear the place; but as I speak now when you get there everyone is busy selling. I have the hope that things will be well’ (Group 3). Street young people engage their detailed local knowledge of the urban environment in combination with social relationships including support from peers, communities, NGOs, and faith-based organisations to manage

everyday struggles to support their personal resilience: 'I sometimes go out for sex work [at night] where I am, by bad luck, raped. But I come to [NGO] where I can wash my body, wash my clothes [...] be given food and then go on my way' (Bukavu Group 6). In Harare, street youth build resilience through churches in the city, developing relationships by attending Bible study (relational) on Sundays (temporal) at a specific Church (spatial) to meet basic needs around eating: 'we first attend Bible study and then they would buy us lunch' (Group 2).

### Lived resiliencies in street youth lives

In exploring characteristics of street youth resilience in experiences shared across contexts, GUOTS data elucidates that street youth's lived experiences are encapsulated by resilience as a functional aspect of their lives. Personal resilience to shock, trauma and hardship is an everyday occurrence, often in response to simultaneous multiple challenges experienced on a recurring daily basis. This lived nature of resilience for street youth, however, has been shown to be *more than* personal, with strategies resulting in resilient outcomes shaped by space, time and relationships.

The data shows that the daily practice of street life is one of resilience. Lived resilience is employed in accessing food, shelter, livelihoods or reducing exposure to harm and risk through their knowledge of temporal and spatial patterns. Each instance of risk must be weighed up against a range of possible choices, which are often constrained due to street contexts. Options can be severely limited and require the enactment of personal resilience through drawing on physical and psychological resources. The paper demonstrates that these internal resources are not uniformly applied, acknowledging that street youth are individually unique according to their intersectional characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, skills and behaviours. Their lived resiliencies are therefore diverse, responding to each new incidence of challenge in new and unique ways, or employing their spatial and temporal knowledge and adapting responses. Street youth's lived resiliencies are therefore a kaleidoscope of multiple possible resilient responses.

Yet, as this paper has also shown, street youth's lived resiliencies are not applied in isolation. Rather, they are enacted within intersecting contexts of space, time and relations and co-facilitated by resources in the systems that youth are connected to. Each instance of risk and resilience is located in space, with particular loci identified depending on the nature of daily activity. This, overlaid with temporal adaptations as different loci, adapts to the nature of space at different times. This is complexly bound up with the relations shaping those places and the networks of available support, combining to shape resilient outcomes. The example below highlights this combination and showcases how lived resiliencies are created.

Lived resiliencies are, therefore, multi-factored but also dynamic and malleable. Any one factor can change, resulting in a new combination of options and challenges. For example, peers can be supportive in one moment and a threat in another. Stealing is usually opportunistic and a response to hunger or lack of other basic needs. To remain resilient, a young person may turn to their peers to meet their own needs and take opportunities presented in time and space to shape the relational outcomes for themselves and others. In Bukavu, when in difficulty, young men talked of arranging to rob their friend. They wait until he has fallen asleep: 'when he falls asleep then we will come back. We sometimes use a blade to cut his pocket, take the money and run away with it' (Group 4). Similarly, in Harare, more experienced street youth may exploit new arrivals to the street: 'if I see that he has money I will ask him to buy me sadza [porridge] and if the child is not very clever, I will steal his money' (Group 3).

The changing shape of relations can also apply at different scales. For example, the police have been shown to offer neither support nor protection but disrupt informal livelihoods through legitimately enforcing licencing laws in Harare, or are perpetrators of sexual violence in Bukavu. Lived resilience means avoiding police interactions, but this can be challenging for street youth whose informal livelihoods are spatially and temporally marginal and resilient responses, which may be beneficial in the moment, can spiral into negative behaviours. As Harare Group 5 indicate: 'the

problems add to our experience as a street kid, every time the police attack us, we become better street kids’.

Finally, the relational nature of lived resiliencies identifies various scales in which support is sought and received. For example, street young people rely on their peers in times of need and resilient strategies often require collaboration with others. Yet peers are not always the best source of support and can advise each other to participate in harmful practices such as sex work, drug use, eating from bins or provide ill-informed advice (see Hunter, van Blerk, and Shand 2021). Institutional support does appear to be part of street youth’s resilient responses to difficulty and, when available, can help to transcend street-level outcomes. In Accra, NGOs were credited with helping when in ‘difficulty they will come to assist me. They have also registered me on the national health insurance scheme; I have some kind of happiness in life’ (Accra Group 7). However, the government were identified as being unhelpful:

They tell us that we are “kobooolos” (people living on the streets). But I think that those of us in need are the people they should give more attention to; but when we go in need, they don’t come in to assist us. When we call at their doorsteps, they don’t mind us; so, we help ourselves. (Accra Group 4).

While capable of ‘helping themselves’, lived resiliencies and capabilities do not replace the role of structural institutional support in street youth’s lives and personal resilience. On the contrary, it is vital that beyond the streets, state systems work to support street young people’s lived resiliencies.

## Conclusions and next steps

This paper has examined the multiple ways in which street youth create resilience strategies, in collaboration with others and the street environment, positioning their daily lives as demonstrating lived resiliencies. When exposed to significant stress, numerous factors may combine to support resilience. While personal factors are important, so too are other relational and contextual factors, including spatialities and temporalities. The paper, therefore conceptualises resilience as a lived process that goes beyond traditional understandings of personal resilience. Street youth ‘lived resiliencies’ emerge as an approach that enmeshes individual capacities with relational and contextual dimensions, exploring the multiple factors involved in overcoming difficulties.

For lived resiliencies to be better supported, research must also go beyond a blanket application of fixed personal resilience in supporting street youth. This fits with growing calls in the resilience literature to conceptualise resilience as multisystemic, relying on a combination of resources across multiple systems for positive outcomes (e.g. Masten 2014; Panter-Brick 2023; Ungar and Theron 2020).

Through accounts of young people growing up on the streets, this paper has shown that street youth’s lived resilience is complex, goes beyond personal characteristics to include a combination of contextual and relational factors. Additionally, such a lived experience of resilience may not always offer appropriate opportunities for young people to make safe choices towards viable futures. A key next step will be applying a multisystemic perspective to shift conceptualisations of resilience to the challenges faced living on the streets away from individual responsibility of young people, towards developing an approach that both recognises young people’s capacities, their social and physical environment co-actors, and the responsibility of states to support them in creating viable futures.

While not all young people’s responses that make up their lived resiliencies are in their best interests, multisystemic actors can create and exacerbate risks, pushing street youth towards risky choices rather than providing sources of support. In taking forward a conceptualisation of lived resiliencies, this paper argues for the translation of personal responsibility for being resilient to the difficulties of growing up on the streets to include all the systems present in street youth lives. Put differently, the paper calls for street youth, peers, communities and institutions to share

responsibility for ensuring that young people can flourish, even when they live on the streets. To this end, there is a need to inform policy and practice communities in ways in which such positive outcomes may be achieved for street youth, and to understand where their inputs can play a vital part in translating risks on the streets towards enabling viable futures.

## Note

1. Ethics approval was provided by the University of Dundee Research Ethics Committee in 2012. Approval Number: UREC 12071

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by UKRI ESRC SDAI: [grant number ES/X013057/1]; UKRI: ESRC SDAI: [grant number ES/X013057/1]; The Backstage Trust; UKRI:ESRC SDAI: [grant number ES/X013057/1].

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