

## **Children crossing borders**

Report on unaccompanied minors who have travelled to South Africa

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## **Introduction**

This research was undertaken for Save the Children UK South Africa Programme by the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand in early 2007. The study aimed to gain insight into the migration experiences of children who cross international borders unaccompanied. The research took place in three main sites, namely, Johannesburg, the border with Zimbabwe (predominantly in Musina) and the border with Mozambique (predominantly in Malelane and Komatipoort).

This report begins to address a significant dearth of information about children who cross international borders. Although there has been increasing research into children's migrations, there has been very little research on children who migrate without a caregiver or those who migrate across international borders. The studies that have been done have often been with very small numbers of children making it difficult to make broad claims about the experiences and needs of children. This study begins to address some of these gaps in order to inform policy and advocacy on behalf of unaccompanied minors in South and Southern Africa.

The research aimed to provide information on the following:

- The routes of migration;
- Who children migrated with;
- The reasons for migration;
- How these children obtained basic necessities such as food, money, shelter, health care and safety;
- And their experiences of arrest, deportation and violence.

## **The need for more research on children who migrate**

Most existing research considers the migration of children as members of a family. Although some of these studies consider the active role that children play in this – either because of children's needs or because of children's potential labour - most do not consider that children move independently of adults. In Southern Africa, the extent of the HIV pandemic and the degree of poverty experienced in the countries of interest in this study means that the migration of children independently of adults is likely to be high and is likely to render the migrating children extremely vulnerable. Although many researchers have called for attention to children's autonomy in deciding to migrate, it is important to consider the negative socio-economic conditions that tend to cause poorer children to migrate. In all studies in Southern Africa children reported their migration as a negative experience as a result of a combination of poor educational opportunities, poverty and HIV.

## **Defining unaccompanied minors**

For the purposes of this study a child included anyone 18 years or younger. To qualify as unaccompanied, the child must have crossed an international border without an adult who was responsible for them. Children who had crossed with an adult friend were not included. In addition, it was decided that children who had been met at the border by a friend or relative who was to care for them in South Africa would not be considered unaccompanied.

## **Methodology**

In order to provide information about these focus areas, a survey of 130 children who migrated without a responsible adult was undertaken. The survey included a combination of quantitative and qualitative information and aimed to provide an overview of the varying needs of unaccompanied minors.

There are some children that we could not include in the study. Firstly, child farm workers were difficult to access as many farmers did not want to let the researchers enter their premises. Secondly, children who had been trafficked for purposes such as sex work (as opposed to children who crossed alone in the hopes of finding work) are likely to also be a group that are difficult to access, as are those who migrate into domestic work. As a result, girls were under represented in the study due to the fact that they are more likely to be employed as domestic or sex workers.

## **Estimating numbers**

What was clear from the research is that there are sufficiently large numbers of children crossing borders unaccompanied to warrant major concern. Researchers were able to interview at least 60 children who fitted the strict definition the methodology had set for its self within a two week period in both Musina and Komatipoort. There was every indication that they could have continued interviewing new children for substantially longer. The initial concern that they may not easily find enough children to form a large sample was entirely unfounded.

However, this research was not able to give accurate estimates of the numbers of children entering South Africa for a number of reasons:

- 1) Illegal immigration is by definition an illicit activity that is not officially recorded and therefore official estimates would not include the large numbers of children which the study found had simply crossed over the fence or the river.
- 2) In South Africa, there are few incentives for unaccompanied children to identify themselves to the authorities.
- 3) Organisations which provide services to children do not regularly keep records
- 4) The lack of services on the borders meant that not all unaccompanied minors ended up in some form of care.
- 5) Some 51% of the sample were below the legal age for work so they would not attempt to gain work permits in any case.

## **The findings**

This research showed that:

- Just over three quarters of those interviewed were boys (76.2%). This is likely to be because girls migrate into domestic work, sex work and other hidden professions making them more difficult to access.
- The mean age of children migrating unaccompanied and illegally was 14 years but some children as young as seven are migrating alone.
- Over three quarters of the children were from Mozambique and Zimbabwe with slightly more children interviewed on the Zimbabwe border than the Mozambican border.

- Most children crossed one border when migrating and by far the majority did not travel through other countries on their way to South Africa.
- Those interviewed in Johannesburg were from a wider group of countries than those on the borders including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda.
- Most children hoped to end up in Gauteng (37%) although a fair number wanted to stay in a border town (27%).
- Children cited a combination of the death of their parents or caregivers, poverty in their home country and opportunities in South Africa as the reasons why they travelled to South Africa.
- Over 50% of the children paid bribes to enter the country and of these almost 80% had paid an informal guide to help them cross.
- One quarter of the children had been illegally returned to their home country and in all cases these illegal returns were carried out by police. A further one quarter had been arrested but later released.
- Of the 40% of children who had been physically hurt while in South Africa, 14% had been assaulted whilst attempting to cross the border.
- 65% of the children were not in school. However in Musina, only 6% were in school compared to 96% in Johannesburg.
- About one quarter made their money by selling in the street, while a similar number made nothing at all. Some 14% made money by collecting plastic bottles from rubbish dumps.
- Girls tended to work in more feminised professions such as braiding hair or domestic work whilst boys were most likely to be involved in selling items.
- About half the children earned less than R200 per week.
- In spite of the low attendance at school, one quarter of the children still identified the schools as the best thing about being in South Africa. This was even the case for some children who were not attending school.
- Crime was clearly mentioned as the worst thing about being in South Africa.
- Less than 10% of the children obtained food from a welfare organisation and most bought their own food or relied on begging.
- In spite of this, 72% of the children felt that their lives in South Africa would be better than their parents' lives.
- When asked what help they most needed in South Africa, the children were equally likely to cite jobs and schooling.
- There were stark differences between the children living in Johannesburg and those on the borders. Those on the borders had almost no access to education or to basic services.

### **Key conclusions**

- Whilst there are several factors which could be hiding the real extent of girls' migration to South Africa, it appears that there is a gendered pattern of migration to South Africa, with boys more likely to migrate alone than girls. This gendered pattern of migration was most striking among children living on the border areas.
- In addition there is striking evidence that children are migrating alone at a very young age. This was also particularly the case for children migrating from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. All of those that were irregular movers were over

the age of 15 years which may indicate that older children had more responsibility for maintaining family in their country of origin.

- This research indicated that children who migrate alone do so because of a combination of the HIV epidemic, poverty and the lack of educational opportunities in their country of origin. This is particularly the case for children from Zimbabwe and Mozambique. For those children in Johannesburg, war in their country of origin was the most common reason given for migration followed by the death of their parents and a lack of food.
- The arrest of children was often not done in accordance with the law. In addition, a pattern of circular arrest and release was common. This is likely to be due to the lack of clarity about the police's responsibility to unaccompanied, undocumented minors. Little is appears to be known about who should take responsibility for unaccompanied minors.
- Very few of the children in this study have ever had contact with a state social worker.
- On the border areas, illegal crossings has resulted in a fairly entrenched informal system of 'guides' who have been implicated in the abuse of children. In addition, these guides were commonly the perpetrators of violence against the children and were the most likely group to elicit bribes from the children.
- Large numbers of unaccompanied children are not in school. This is worst in Musina but is also of great concern in Komatipoort. Interviews with service providers in the area indicate that this is likely to be a result of a lack of knowledge among educators about the rights of unaccompanied minors as well as xenophobia against them.
- In addition, most of the children on the borders were responsible for finding their own food and money. This means that simply ensuring that schools do not refuse them access is unlikely to ensure that these children attend school. Rather there is the need for greater basic services on the borders if the children are to attend school.
- Many children are working, regardless of their age and this work is often unreliable, such as street trading or dangerous. Children reported not being paid for work as well as being paid very low amounts. The undocumented status of the children and the frequent reports of illegal returns by police means that child labour laws are not adequately enforced. Children are not likely to report such exploitation.
- Children had been subjected to a great deal of crime and frequently mentioned this as the worst thing about being in South Africa.
- The combined difficulties of lack of basic needs, lack of access to education and experiences of violence were all significantly worse on the border areas and are

likely to be a result of the few NGO service providers in these areas relative to Johannesburg.

- In spite of the many hardships children were surprisingly optimistic about their futures. They felt that South Africa afforded them opportunities that their countries of origin did not and that if they could access education in South Africa it would be of a very good quality and would create even more opportunities for them. A large number of children felt that their lives would be better than their parent's lives and this was largely attributed to them being in South Africa.

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Which listens to children and learns.

Where all children have hope and opportunity.

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Save the Children fights for children's rights; we deliver immediate and lasting improvement to children's lives worldwide.

### **We develop and deliver programmes for and with children that:**

- provide practical assistance and action to help children directly, working with local partners wherever possible.
- influence decision-makers by demonstrating what change is possible, why it's desirable and affordable, and how it can be replicated. And we work with civil society to press for this change.
- build the capacity of government and other actors to deliver more for children.



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