



TACKLING MODERN SLAVERY ON THE STREET

Briefing Paper
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OVERVIEW

In 2016, 40.3 million people were victims of modern slavery and one in four of the victims were children. Children in street situations are often entangled in situations of exploitation which are similar to those experienced by child victims of modern slavery. Nevertheless, they remain absent in international and national efforts to tackle modern slavery.

After outlining and examining existing research on the intersections and drivers of modern slavery and street-connectedness, this briefing will set out the Consortium for Street Children's recommendations for how government initiatives on tackling modern slavery abroad and at home can be strengthened by incorporating measures to protect children in street situations.

WHO ARE 'CHILDREN IN STREET SITUATIONS'?

Commonly shortened to 'street children', this term is used to describe children who depend on the streets to live and/or work, whether alone or with friends and family, as well as children who feel that the streets are an important part of their life and identity. In the UK, they are more commonly recognised as homeless youth.

WHAT IS 'MODERN SLAVERY'?

Modern slavery refers to organised crime in which people are treated as commodities and exploited for commercial gain. It encompasses offences such as human trafficking, debt bondage, forced marriage, servitude and forced or compulsory labour.

Unpacking the intersections of modern slavery and street-connectedness

Evidence gathering on the drivers of modern slavery and street-connectedness demonstrates clear commonalities between the two fields (Figure 1). Poverty and inequality are well-established drivers of both street-connectedness and modern slavery, and children that are forced to work due to poverty are at greater risk of experiencing the worst forms of child labour, including slavery and sexual exploitation.

Children in street situations and children engaged in exploitative labour often come from socially excluded communities or belong to groups that are commonly discriminated against. Once on the street or engaged in types of modern slavery, stigmatisation and ostracisation of children can further increase exploitation and vulnerability to violence and abuse.

The risk of street-connectedness becomes elevated in contexts with weak child protection systems. When children experience neglect, violence and abuse at home or in school, they often seek support and refuge in the streets. Moreover, unstable family connections such as loss of parental responsibility and/or societal tolerance of exploitation of children can also drive children into modern slavery.

Children on the move as a result of conflict or natural disasters, and in particular unaccompanied minors, are vulnerable to ending up either in street situations or modern slavery or both – not in the least due to their uncertain legal status, which can mean they only enjoy limited rights and protection from the government in the host country.

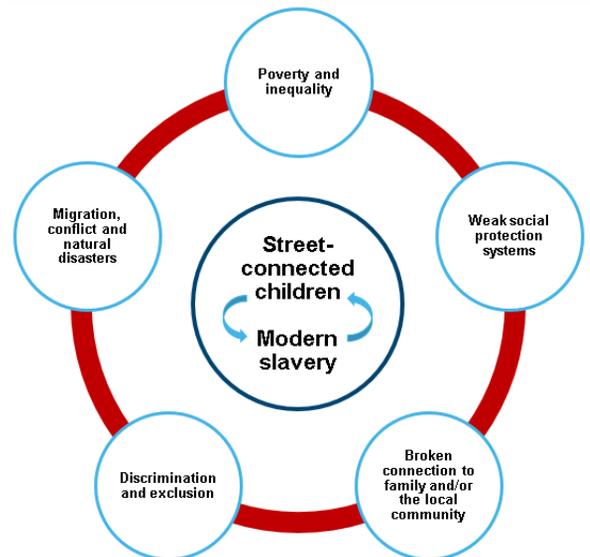


Figure 1: Intersecting drivers of modern slavery and street-connectedness

VISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY

The high risk of abuse and exploitation faced by street-connected children means they may remain 'invisible' for their own safety. Street-connected girls face an increased risk of gender-based violence, exploitation, discrimination and reproductive health risks when they are visible on the streets. 'Invisibility' creates challenges for those seeking to locate these children in order to document what is happening to them and provide support.

Street-connected children's circumstances also diminish the likelihood that they will seek support from authorities if they are harmed. Often this invisibility means they are highly unlikely to advocate for their own needs, rights

and welfare.

Limited research or data collection has thus far been conducted on how the shared vulnerabilities and drivers of street-connectedness and modern slavery intersect. We believe this has resulted in street-connected children being excluded from anti-slavery initiatives. With more evidence on the different risk profiles of street-connected children, legislators and policymakers will be able to design responses to modern slavery that include children in street situations and ensure that they are able to access crucial support services. Governments must allocate adequate resources and priority for this research and data collection to be carried out.



Street children's own stories on modern slavery

Real life stories from children in street situations clearly showcase that street-connectedness and the lack of the protection of adults leave children exposed to various forms of violence, abuse and modern slavery.

Even though certain forms of modern slavery are predominant amongst street-connected children (e.g. recruitment into gangs or commercial sexual exploitation), their specific

involvement across other forms of modern slavery is not well documented. Some types of exploitation that children in street situations experience, such as forced child begging, are rarely perceived as modern slavery. Modern slavery programmes will be more successful once street-connected children are explicitly addressed and included.

Leo, Guatemala



Leo is 17 years old. He ran away from home 10 years ago to escape abuse and began living on the streets of Guatemala City. Other children living on the streets taught him that the best way to evade cold, hunger and loneliness was to sniff glue. During the day, Leo works to be able to afford bottles of glue; he stands at traffic lights in the centre of the city and cleans car windscreens for tips. On a good day, he could earn anything up to \$8 – on a bad day, it is much less.

Some of Leo's friends are delivery boys and girls for gangs. Leo is sometimes approached to “run errands” for them as well, but so far he has managed to escape getting involved because of his glue-sniffing, as street children who are high on glue are less predictable and therefore less useful to the gangs. Leo knows that if you join a gang, you are in it for life, and if you try to leave, they kill you. He has had too many friends who have ended up on the wrong side of the gangs' favour and have turned up dead on the side of the road.

A couple of years ago, Leo started attending activities with Toybox's partner organisation in Guatemala City. Through workshops, he has learned a variety of different performance skills, such as mime, juggling and dance, that he uses to earn extra money on top of windscreen cleaning. Toybox's partners are helping him to see his worth and understand that he does not have to stay on the streets; he now feels more positively about his future and the opportunities ahead of him.



This case study highlights the complexities of the role that labour plays in the lives of street-connected children. Some forms of work, like being a gang's delivery boy, are undertaken under duress. Other forms of work, like cleaning car windscreens, are hazardous but undertaken without explicit coercion from another person. In some cases, work may have a positive influence: it can in some circumstances develop a child's skill set, generate essential income and give them a sense of self-worth.



A.K., India

“I am A.K. and I am 14 years old. When I was 4 years old I started living under the bridge of NRS medical hospital. My father left my mother and we started living the most problematic time of our lives. I started working as a maid in two houses in Howrah to save myself from starvation. I continued my work for a year but I left my job because the landlord started scolding me and sometimes harassed me physically (...).

We started living in the Sealdah car parking area. Then, I came to Mumbai with my aunty in search of a job, but I had to return after hearing that my mother is sick. I started living in the Sealdah car parking area again. Here I met a boy and I trusted him. He took me to Bihar and forced me to dance on a dance bar. Somehow I managed to run away from that place. Now I am staying in Sealdah permanently but I never got the opportunity of studying due to money problems. The Street Workers from Child in Need India come to visit us daily and interact with us. We get the chance to share our problems and needs with them. (...) I want to study in school and I want a safe life where I can grow up and fulfil my incomplete dreams.”



Protecting the most vulnerable

The key international treaty relating to children, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), contains clear provisions protecting all children, including children in street situations, from modern slavery and its harms. All children have the right to protection from economic exploitation and hazardous and harmful work, as stated in Article 32 of the CRC. Moreover, children have the right to be free from all forms of violence. Articles 19 and 39 set out the right of the child to freedom from physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation. States are responsible for preventing violence against children, protecting child victims and witnesses as well as investigating and punishing those responsible and providing redress for victims.

Articles 34, 35 and 36 of the CRC set out States' obligations to protect children from the different forms of modern slavery: sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking and other exploitation. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography is also relevant to their protection from commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking.

In 2017, the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General Comment No. 21 on Children in Street Situations.

General Comment No. 21 explicitly sets out the obligations of States in implementing the CRC for street-connected children. It emphasises the particular vulnerability of street-connected children to violence and exploitation, and urges governments to take immediate and urgent measures to protect these children from violence, economic exploitation and the worst forms of child labour.

UK INITIATIVES

The United Kingdom committed to ensuring that modern slavery is effectively investigated and prosecuted in its 2014 cross-government strategy on modern slavery and through the adoption of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015.

The 2014 strategy on tackling modern slavery interprets the United Kingdom's international obligations to reduce the prevalence of modern slavery as comprising four key strands, as set out in the table below.

To ensure that the 'protect' and 'prepare' strands of this strategy, which are aimed at reducing vulnerability, reach the most marginalised children, the Consortium for Street Children believes it is necessary for modern slavery initiatives to incorporate specific and explicit strategies for the inclusion of street-connected children.

Pursue	Prosecute and disrupt individuals and groups responsible for modern slavery	→ Reduce threat
Prevent	Prevent people from engaging in modern slavery	
Protect	Strengthen safeguards against modern slavery by protecting vulnerable people from exploitation and increasing awareness of and resilience against this crime	→ Reduce vulnerability
Prepare	Reduce the harm caused by modern slavery through improved victim identification and enhanced support	

Source: Government of the United Kingdom, *Modern Slavery Strategy*, November 2014, p.10.



What can be done?

Despite the obvious parallels, street-connected children remain largely absent by omission in international and national initiatives aimed at tackling modern slavery. This can be partly explained by the limited evidence base on the shared vulnerabilities and intersecting drivers in the two fields.

A strong evidence base can improve future responses to modern slavery by including measures addressing cross-cutting factors such as gender, age and ethnicity. Current research in both fields reveal different gendered vulnerabilities and patterns in the sectors where modern slavery are happening. Without an evidence base to inform the efforts of legislators and policymakers, it remains impossible to design the necessary joint responses that can make a difference for the most vulnerable children.

→ **Recommendation 1: States should require explicit data collection on street-connected children as part of modern slavery initiatives in order to create the evidence base required for joint responses to tackle modern slavery and street-connectedness.**

Initiatives on modern slavery need to account for children's lived experiences. Appropriate forms of income generation can play a key role in the survival and development of street-connected children. Consequently, efforts to tackle forced child labour which feature criminalisation as the primary response – either by criminalising the form of work or by criminalising the person responsible for the child – will not sustainably protect children from exploitation and may push them into worse forms of exploitation to survive.

→ **Recommendation 2: States should decriminalise begging and survival behaviours for children and youth, and cease prosecuting children and youth who become involved in criminal activity as a result of modern slavery.**

In connection with this, child protection systems must ensure that safety nets (such as social

welfare payments) are available independently to children, not just for families. Though many children retain links with their families while on the streets, some do not, due to family breakdown, violence and abuse or bereavement.

Street-connected children's inability to independently obtain financial support leaves them vulnerable to harmful and exploitative forms of labour. Without long-term income generation children will be reliant on the often-criminalised methods of obtaining an income on the streets, keeping them at risk of being exploited.

→ **Recommendation 3: States should strengthen social protection systems to be flexible and inclusive of children who live and work on the streets.**

Education is crucial for children to develop and have opportunities for safe, reliable income generation as adults, reducing vulnerability to modern slavery. Flexible solutions are necessary to make education available and accessible to street-connected children, such as through mobile schools, catch-up classes and vocational training.

→ **Recommendation 4: States should take concrete and specific measures to enhance access to education for street-connected children.**

To prevent and eradicate modern slavery, access to public services is key, but in many countries access to these services is limited to those who have been registered at birth; many street-connected children are unregistered. Similarly, it is difficult to identify victims of modern slavery where they are untraceable due to their lack of legal identity; this affects children on the move who lack documentation, such as undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers.

→ **Recommendation 5: States should ensure access to birth registration and legal ID for all, with specific emphasis on street-connected children.**



Sources and further reading

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