

## A Case Study on the Begging Street Kids

There are 51,000 street children in Delhi; 20% are girls.

- 70% are on the street despite having a home in Delhi.
- 50.5% are illiterate. 87% earn a living – 20% as ragpickers, 15.8% as street vendors, 15% by begging.
- Over 50% have suffered verbal, physical or sexual abuse.
- Fewer than 20% have ID cards or birth certificates, and so they miss out on government schemes.

Little boys with painted moustaches, performing acrobatics and begging for a reward. Kids dodging between vehicles to sell their wares. Girls, siblings in their arms, seeking alms. Common enough vignettes at the crossroads in Delhi, as in many other cities of India. Just like the sight of innumerable children working in roadside eateries and industrial units.

Between feeling upset and wanting to help these children enjoy a normal life, including going to school, many of us wonder about their hard lives. In a first-of-its-kind census, Save the Children, an NGO, in association with the Institute for Human Development, Delhi, has now tried to supplement the quantitative data with qualitative data on some 51,000 children, below 18, living and eking out a livelihood on the streets of Delhi.

The survey, 'Surviving the Streets', conducted in all nine districts of Delhi state in July-August 2010, reveals that an astonishing 70 per cent of street children have to fend for themselves though their parents, siblings or other relatives also live in the city. Only around 10 per cent were found to be totally cut off from their homes and villages. The largest chunk (61 per cent) were in the 7-14 years age group, while 23 per cent were in the 15-18 years bracket. As Delhi, with Mumbai and Calcutta, is home to the largest number of street-dwellers, the capital was chosen for the first detailed study, "which hopefully will catch the attention of the government", says Thomas Chandy, CEO of Save the Children.

"There could be 10 per cent underestimation in the survey of street children in Delhi, particularly those working in industrial units," says Dr Balwant Mehta, a senior researcher at the Institute for Human Development. Having done a survey of shelterless people in Delhi in the winter of 2007, Mehta reveals that the numbers have risen sharply from the then figure of 41,000, including children. The latest detailed survey, through interaction with those living on the streets, has revealed the number of street children alone to be 50,923, with girls constituting 20 per cent.

Most of the children are engaged in ragpicking (20.3 per cent) followed by vending (15.18 per cent), begging (15 per cent), working in roadside stalls or repair shops (12.19 per cent), dhabas (6.24 per cent) and manufacturing units (1.22 per cent). It is difficult to ascertain the number working in industrial units, as these kids are hardly able to get out of the hell-holes they work in. Earning on an average about Rs 2,240 per month, over 57 per cent of the street children visit their homes periodically and hand over about half their earnings to parents, relatives, gang leaders and even the police.

Despite staying and moving about in groups, over 50 per cent spoke of some kind of abuse – verbal, physical and even sexual, sometimes at the hands of policemen. "Yet most of them did

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not want to go back home. There is a strange attractiveness of the street as against the terrible hunger, poverty or other factors that brought them to Delhi," says Chandy.

In the absence of ID cards, a majority miss out on government schemes to educate themselves or acquire skills. As rights activist Colin Gonsalves points out, these are children "driven from schools to streets and into factories. What is worse, they are treated like animals or criminals". Hopefully, the searing revelations of the report will make policy-makers sit up and provide street children with more humane life choices.

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