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From Home to the Streets: Investigating the Patterns of Running Away from Home and the Push & Pull Factors of Street Children in Peshawar

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Abstract

This study investigates the question: why children are on the streets in Peshawar? Street children are one of the 'at risk' categories of children as per national laws and international instruments. Literature reveals a complex interplay of push and pull factors contributing to the presence of children on the streets in Peshawar. This study was conducted on street children who were currently under the custody of state institutions in Peshawar. The study employed interviews of tools for data collection. All ethical protocols were followed. The study found a total of eighteen (18) factors (12 push and 6 pull) contributing for children to be on the streets of Peshawar. The study also shed light on patterns of running from home. The study informs the development of more effective interventions and policies to protect vulnerable children and facilitate their reintegration into safe and supportive environments within Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Keywords: Street children, push factors, pull factors, family disruption, peer support, Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Children constitute a large part of the global population. Out of 02.2 billion children worldwide, almost 0.2 billion reside in developing countries with all the problems of under-development including poverty, illiteracy, ill health, parental neglect, etc. (UNICEF, 2107; UNFPA, 2009). Amongst the children aged 05 to 18 (when a child needs to be in school), about 122 million are forced to work (ILO, 2018). Poverty and other factors force children to move to the streets for work and other matters. South Asia has a significant number of street children such as India with 18 million, Bangladesh 4 million and Pakistan 1.5 million. However, the actual numbers are likely higher than reported due to the transient nature of street children (Abdullah et al, 2014). This phenomenon of street children is a growing and concerning issue in many urban centers, particularly in cities like Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These children, often displaced from their homes, are forced to navigate the challenges of life on the streets, where they face numerous risks, including exploitation, abuse, and neglect. The causes behind children turning to the streets are multifaceted, arising from a combination of socio-economic, familial, and external factors. These causes can be broadly categorized into two main categories: push factors and pull factors. Push factors, such as



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poverty, family instability, unemployment, lack of access to education, and domestic abuse, often force children to leave their homes in search of safety and a better life. On the other hand, pull factors, including the allure of perceived freedom, opportunities for work, peer influence, and even involvement in substance abuse, act as additional attractions to street life.

The broader context of urbanization, rural-urban migration, and socio-political instability further compounds the situation, particularly in regions like Peshawar. Issues like war, armed conflict, and displacement disrupt traditional family structures and amplify the vulnerabilities of children, making them more prone to a life on the streets. Unfortunately, the consequences of street life are far-reaching, impacting the physical, emotional, and social development of these children, often hindering their future prospects. Given the complex nature of this issue, it is crucial to understand and address the interplay between these push and pull factors in order to develop effective interventions that can reduce the number of children living on the streets and improve their overall well-being.

Literature Review

Push Factors

Economic instability, such as unemployment, low wages, and crises, can lead to families struggling to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter, and education. This can lead to children being pushed onto the streets, as evidenced by a study by Sattar and Yasmeen (2012). Long working hours, low wages, and low literacy levels contribute to children's dependency, unhappiness, anxiety, and depression. Prolonged poverty also leads to youth violence, with children aged 12-17 more likely to be victims of violent crimes. The disrupted socioeconomic structure of families and the influx of different people into cities are major causes of this phenomenon. Addressing socioeconomic challenges is recommended as the first approach to ending this menace.

Due to the harsh behavior of the mother or father, children may occasionally leave their homes, which can result in domestic violence, abuse, neglect, or family disputes. In these situations, they are unable to connect with either parent and force them to remain at home by forming good relationships. Unhappy and unfavorable family situations can cause relationships to break down and push kids to live on the streets (Melchior et al., 2012; Abro, 2012).

Limited access to quality education or the need to contribute to the family's income can result in children dropping out of school and subsequently ending up on the streets (Hossain et al., 2014).

According to Robert Stock (2012), one of the reasons why children end up on the streets is because of the modernization process, which also causes traditional family structures and traditional values to fall down.

Families may find it challenging to adapt to urban living as a result of social and economic inequalities brought about by rapid urbanization. As a result, some kids might move to cities in pursuit of better prospects (UNICEF, 2021).

According to Cluver et al. (2012), children who have lost their parents or experienced family separation as a consequence of disputes, natural catastrophes, illness outbreaks, or any other cause receive inadequate care and support, which makes them more susceptible to living on the streets to take to the streets in search of safety (Melchior et al., 2012; Abro, 2012).

Dejman et al (2015) believed that the majority (80%) of street children use drugs



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like opium, cannabis, and pills in parks and on the streets. The tendency among them to start drugs is at the age of 10-11. They start with cigarettes and turn to stronger drugs with time. She further reveals that drug use by street children is often associated with their aggressive behavior, however, they initially start taking drugs to overcome the fatigue, sadness, and physical and psychological stress they encountered due to family problems and failures in life.

In addition, families where parents use drugs usually use their children for the procurement of drugs and as a result the children are more inclined to get into the habit of using drugs.

The children may end up on the streets due to drug or alcohol addiction, either by their own choices or through exposure to substance-abusing peers or family members (Dejman et al (2015); United Nations, 2020)

Children living in regions affected by armed conflicts or forced displacement may flee their homes to escape violence, leading to an increase in the number of street children (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021).

Some children may be lured or coerced into exploitative situations such as child labor, child trafficking, or child prostitution, making them vulnerable to street life (International Labor Organization, 2017).

Family-centered issues, such as low income, education, and disruption due to sickness, death, divorce, and second marriage, can lead to children living on the street. Friends often motivate children to leave home and live on the street. Other factors, such as forced displacement during natural and man-made disasters, also contribute to children's reliance on the street.

Pull Factors

For some street children, the attraction of the streets lies in the perception of freedom and independence. Away from adult supervision, they can make their own decisions and avoid rules and restrictions (Cockburn & Duffield, 2007). Many street children find a sense of belonging and camaraderie among their peers on the streets, which can be more appealing than strained family relationships (Save the Children, 2016). Street life can be seen as an escape from abusive or neglectful family environments, providing temporary relief from harm (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003). Some children are attracted to the streets by the possibility of earning money through activities like begging, scavenging, or engaging in informal labor (Njoka, 2017).

The availability of drugs and substances on the streets can draw vulnerable children into addiction, as they may view the streets as a source of such substances (UNICEF, 2009). Street life often offers immediate rewards, such as access to food, shelter, or small amounts of money, which can be more appealing to children than long-term goals like education (Save the Children, 2016). As the street children roam around the streets selling small items, begging, and collecting junk to earn money without any fear of parents or any elder's supervision and accountability. This absence of authority figures on the street may seem attractive to children who wish to avoid adult supervision and accountability (Cockburn & Duffield, 2007).

Problem Statement

One of the key UN agendas for children over the past two decades has been 'access to free and compulsory primary education for all' (The World Bank, 2014).



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Pakistan adopted the same UN goal and strived further to implement the program in letter and spirit. There are about 51.53 million children under 16 in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2018). Almost 44% of school-going children (22.84 million) are out of school in Pakistan (UNICEF, 2020). This is the 2nd highest out-of-school children figure in the world. In *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*¹, the number of out-of-school children is 2.3 million, the majority (over 70%) of which is girls (UNICEF, 2020).

One could ask about the routine of those 44% of out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan. An easy guess is that they can be found on the streets of major cities or working as domestic servants. A survey conducted by Anwar (2002) found that 1.2 million children work on the streets in major cities of Pakistan as vendors, beggars, shoe shiners, car windscreen washers, and flower sellers. After two decades, the situation did not change significantly as in 2019, the UN reported 1.2 to 1.5 million children on the major streets of Pakistan. Peshawar, one of the major cities of Pakistan and the Capital city of *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* holds over 10,000 children on the streets (SPARC, 2012).

Street children are defined by Inter-NGO-Switzerland (Ennew, 1994, p.15), in the following words “any girl or boy who has not reached his adulthood, for whom the street (include occupied dwellings, wasteland) has become his or her habitual abode and/ or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults”.

Some studies categorize street children into two types: (i) child on the street, and (ii) child of the street. A child on the street is one who works on the streets and markets of the cities, selling or begging. Such children work in the daytime and return home and live with their parents. While a child of the street is a homeless street child who works, lives, and sleeps in the street; often lacking any contact with his family and may have or have not occasional contact with his family (SPARC, 2012). The factors that push these children to street life include poverty, domestic violence, child abuse, urbanization, drug abuse of parents, parental breakups, death of parents force them (children) to leave homes and live on the streets (Abdelgalil, et.al, 2004; Crombach, et.al., 2014; Sharma, 2019; SPARC, 2012).

As a result of unsafe and threatening environment at home encourage children to adopt the streets as permanent places of living without the guidance and supervision of parents or any adult. This is the main focus of this research is to explore and explain those causes that push the child on the street.

Research Questions

- 1- What are the factors within family that compel children to leave their homes
- 2- How do external influences serve as pull factors that attract children in Peshawar to live on the streets?

Objectives

¹ *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* is one of the Provinces in Pakistan and is mainly bordered with Afghanistan on its West. It was previously called ‘North West Frontier Province’ (NWFP).



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1. To explore and analyze the socio-economic and familial factors (push factors) that contributes to children leaving their homes and living on the streets in Peshawar.
2. To examine the external influences (pull factors) that attracts children to the street.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is a part of larger PhD study. The methodology adopted for this research study was qualitative in nature. The participants of the study were the children who were brought to child protection institute “*Zamung Kor*” (ZK) established by government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as result of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act 2010.

A total of ten (10) children were interviewed through open-ended interviews in local language. The selection of children was based on the type of street children i.e. children on the street and children of the street. Five children from each category were identified by the staff of ZK for the purpose of this research study. It was not easy to access the children and staff in the institute by the outsiders (even me as a researcher). A proper protocol in terms of security and administrative permission needed to be sought each time by visiting the institute for conducting interviews with the staff and children.

The interviews were then transcribed into English language and thematic analysis was performed on transcribed interviews. This paper is based on one of the theme being Push and Pull factors on the street.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSES:

PUSH FACTORS

Table 1: Factors influencing a child’s decision to be on the street

Push Factors	Pull Factors
1. Death of Parent(s)	1. Living in Group and Freedom at Street Life
2. Divorced Parents	2. Earning, Having and using money without restriction
3. Parental Carelessness	3. Watching Films at Cinema
4. Poverty of Parents	4. Taking Drugs
5. Escaping from Work	5. Having Fun Together
6. Drug Addiction of Father	6. Nights on the street
7. Parental/ Siblings’ Sickness	
8. Feeling Boredom at Home	
9. Non-Admission in the School	
10. Corporal Punishment	
11. Truancy	
12. Child Labor (Work History)	



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Table generated from the field data

Family Dynamics

The primary data has discovered that street children have several family issues in which the most prominent issue is the absence of one or both parents because of death, divorce, remarriage, or carelessness on the part of parents. The issues that were explored by the street children as factors that brought them to the street included poverty, drug addiction of the father and severe illness of siblings/parents (cancer, Hepatitis, and physical disabilities because of accidents). Similarly, child labor, absenteeism, truancy, and non-admission in the school were also some of the reasons that pushed children to the street.

Those children whose parents died were not admitted to the school while living with their paternal or maternal uncles. Their uncles used to send them on the street (for scavenging) while used to send their children to school. On the contrary, those children whose parents were alive were once admitted to the school but due to poverty and other family issue, they could not continue. In some cases, the parents were so careless that they never bothered to admit their children to school, although their children were interested in going to school. One of the children narrated that:

I did not like to be at home and doing silly jobs (bringing foodstuff for my family and any other thing required at home) as and when told by my father to do. I wanted to go to school but my father did not want me to go to school.

One of the major reasons for being on the street was corporal punishment at home or workplace. As a result, children used to hide from the workplace or leave their homes to secure themselves from punishment. One of the children reported that:

One day my father asked me to bring something from the market, but, unluckily I lost the money. When I told my father, he became annoyed and beat me a lot. On that day, I run away from my home.

The researcher discovered that many children remained in certain labor- working in brick kiln kilns, selling fruit. One of the children narrated his interesting story whereby he was impressed by his friends and started working on the street by stating that:

One day I was playing in the street, during that time some of my friends told me to start selling masks because it gave much money. I liked the idea and took Rs.50 from my father. I bought masks of with that money and started selling at Arbab Road, Peshawar. When I realized that selling masks gave me sufficient money; then, I started it regularly.

Another child narrated that:

With time, I found work to survive by telling lies to them that I came from a far area. Then, they agreed to give me work and provided me food and space to live with them. If I used to make any mistake then they used to become angry with me. Whatever the nature of the job was, it was my compulsion. I worked as a scavenger, collecting



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bottles and cans, etc. They used to give me Rs. 500 per week. After having food, I used to save some amount and I managed to come back to Mardan. They also with sheltered me for a night stay with them. They were very nice people.

Leaving Home- Families in Flux: Navigating the Streets

Street children have tends to leave their homes because of unhappy circumstances in the family because of parental negligence, single parenthood, divorce, second marriage of mother or father, elopement (extra marital relationship) and death of parents. The neglect and lack of parental check is reflected on children in terms of their non- admission in the school, sending them for labor and remained careless about their conditions in the work place. One of the street children narrated that:

My father died due to some serious illness. Initially my mother used to send me to brick kiln for work but then I ran away from there. Then I started to work with fruit seller but I ran away from there too.

Another child reported that:

I did not like to be at home and doing silly jobs (bringing food stuff and any other thing required at home) whatever my father used to make me do. I wanted to go to school but my father did not want.

There were certain circumstances where the orphan children were living with their immediate kin but even they could not take proper care of them. They used to send the child for junk collection and left him unprotected on the streets of Rawalpindi. This narrated that:

I was fed up of collecting junk on the street and going home late after selling the junk. I also used to get hurt by seeing that my cousins were used to be in school. I never discussed my plan of running away from, but I randomly used to say to my aunt that one day I will leave this home. My aunt used to forbid me by saying such things and used says that if “your uncle become aware of your plan, he will treat you badly”. One day when I got fed up of my routine, I asked my uncle that I am going for scavenging and reached to bus terminal through local transport. There, I got a bus for Peshawar and reached here.

Another child while narrating his story of leaving home reported that:

On the day when my father beat me, I run away from my home. I spent my first night on the street then I met few boys and remained with them on the streets of *Hashnagri* for three years. One day my maternal grandfather caught me in the market and took me back to home. I spent few days at home and again run away because I was habitual of street life.

Patterns of Running away From Home

In most of the cases children used to run away from home alone, with cousins or friends and remained on the street for several days until and unless their parents



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or relative would catch them and brought them to home. One of the children reported that:

Sometime, I used to run from home along with my cousins and remained on the street of sadder bazar or *Hashnagri* for almost a month or whenever my father would catch me he used to took me back to home. There, he used to chain but I used to break or open the chains somehow by knife if my mother used to forget it there and used to run away again from home.

Another child reported that:

Sometimes, my mother used to catch me from the street and took me back to home but after few days I would again run away from home again.

Poor family income, education, and family disruption due to disease, death, divorce, parent's second marriage, and their children ending up on the streets are just a few of the elements that are connected to issues that are focused on the family. Children who feel that their family are not doing enough to support them in overcoming adversity may become more dependent on their friends, who may then encourage them to run away from home and live on the streets with their friends using a variety of strategies. But it's not just these elements that spur kids to leave their houses; it's also the allure of living on the streets, with its lack of parental control, freedom to work, freedom to wander, and ability to govern one's life without restrictions. However, the following list contains specific causes that attract and push kids to the streets.

PULL FACTORS ON THE STREET

Living in Group and Freedom at Street Life

Street children are unhappy children because of their family circumstances that serve as push factors for these children to the street. Beside push factors, certain factors attract children to the street that make them free, happy, and independent and permanently stay on the street. As soon as a child joins the street for whatever reason, he joins other children on the street. They wander on the street, eat, play, sleep, buy, and use drugs in groups. One of the street children recalled his story by narrating that:

On the day when my father beat me, I ran away from my home. I spent my first night on the street in *Hashnagri*, Peshawar. Then, I met a few boys (who are now with me in this institution) and remained with them on the streets of *Hashnagri* for three years.

Street children reside on the street without any supervision. There is no restriction on their mobility, activities, association, and on their way of living. They are willing to do any activity (from junk collection to being sexually abused) that pays them money in return. Their mobility is unrestricted because of unsupervised life on the street. They freely move from one place to another (but in groups) i.e. to places where charity (food, cash) is distributed, to watch a film at the cinema and buying drugs (cannabis, ICE), and living on the street with a fear to be caught by the police because. One of the children reported that:

We all friends used to wander together, play together, and even take drugs together. Sometimes we used to fight with each other but we never



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did anything wrong (Sexual abuse/acts) to each other.

Watching Film at Cinema

The only thing that could keep street children happy was watching films at the cinema. They used to collect scraps (plastic bottles, tin, etc) and sell them to earn money. The majority of the children reported that they used to earn Rs.100-200 daily and the cinema ticket was also Rs. 200. One of the street children narrated that:

I used to go to watch a film in the cinema in *Khyber Bazar*². The cinema in Sadder bazar was closed down due to some fault. We used to spend all our money on buying cinema tickets and nothing would be left for any other use, therefore, for the food we used to go to *sadder bazaar*³ and from the hotel, we used to get free food.

Using Drugs

Street children have sufficient money on daily basis to spend on their favorite things like watching film, playing video games, and buying drugs. The daily routine of street children is so tiresome because of day-long roaming on the street. At night they must use drugs (cannabis and ICE through cigarettes and ICE through bottles) to get relax. The majority of the street children started taking drugs because of peer pressure. One of the street children reported that:

We used to have enough money to buy drugs. Our street friend introduced us to the place (Karkhano⁴ Market) and person from whom to buy drugs. We used to buy it from Karkhano Market. If we used to buy Rs. 50, that would be enough for one day but for three days we had to buy Rs. 100.

It is also worth mentioning that in such places usually police are there but police never stop them or asked them the purpose for being there. When the children were asked about the presence of police, a child reported that:

I used to take drugs daily and used to go to Karkhano⁵ The market for buying cannabis. Although police used to be there they never asked for or had body checks for this purpose.

It is important to remember that these pull factors frequently combine with the push forces that force kids to leave their families and live on the streets. It is crucial to understand that, rather than being driven by a single pull factor, the decision to live on the streets is frequently complicated and impacted by several variables. The talk that follows provides a detailed explanation of the hazards, threats, and difficulties that street children face.

PULL FACTORS ON THE STREET

Living in Group and Freedom at Street Life

Street children are unhappy children because of their family circumstances that serve as push factors for these children to the street. Beside push factors, certain

² Bazar is an Urdu language word which means Market. Khyber Bazar is the name of the Market in Peshawar.

³ Sadar Bazar is an Urdu language word and name of the market in Peshawar.

⁴ Karkhano is a Pashtu language word which means industries and Karkhano market is the name of the market.

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⁸ *Karkhano* is a Pashtu language word which means industries and *Karkhano market* is the name of the market.



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CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, the study found that death of parent(s), parental divorce, parents' carelessness, poverty, escaping behaviour, father's drug addiction, parental sickness, certain personality traits, non-admission in school, corporal punishment, truancy, and child labour are some of the push factors for children in Peshawar to be on the street. These push factors can be divided into three categories: (1) family related, (2) school related, and (3) work history/child labour. Freedom of street life, personal income/financial independence, independence of entertainment (watching movies etc.), drug use, having independence of fun, and street nights are some of the pull factors for children to be on the streets of Peshawar. The study recommends strengthening family unit through parental counseling and other means as well as strong school support system to be preventive factors for children to be on the streets of Peshawar. Furthermore, strong community support for struggling families could also prevent children to be on the street. Besides, strong monitoring of major hotspots by state agencies charged with child protection may also reduce children presence on the street.

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⁹ Karkhano is Pashtu language word which mean Industrial.



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