



STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN MYTH BUSTERS CHALLENGE YOUR PERCEPTIONS

There are a number of common misconceptions about children in street situations, from who they are, to how many there are around the world, to why children connect to the streets in the first place.

WHO ARE STREET CHILDREN?

✗ MYTH

Street children live on the street

✓ BUSTER

Street children have many connections to the street - some live on the street, some work on the street, others spend much of their time 'hanging out' in public spaces and do not go to school. Some do all three. Some street children maintain relationships with their family whereas others have lost or broken all contact. 'Street children' are also sometimes called 'runaways' or are known as 'children in street situations' or increasingly as 'street-connected children'. Whatever they are called, the street plays a significant role in their everyday lives and identities.

CAUSES LEADING CHILDREN TO THE STREETS

✗ MYTH

Children are pushed onto the street by family breakdown

✓ BUSTER

Street-connected children come from families with a wide range of experiences, including death, dislocation, isolation, poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, child abuse and drug use. Some come from families unable to accept a child's desire to act against deeply-held convictions around arranged marriage, sexuality, FGM etc. Factors that 'push' children onto the streets are usually complex, emerging suddenly or over time. Larger forces are usually at work in their community and wider society, from ethnic or sexual discrimination, through heightened inequalities to inadequate social protection for families, women or children. There are also factors which 'pull' children onto the street such as the enticements of apparent freedom, financial independence, friendships, adventure, and city glamour. Children may experience a whole combination of push and pull factors as they develop strong connections with the street and loosen their connections to home.

NUMBERS OF STREET CHILDREN

✗ MYTH

There are 100 million street children in the world

✓ BUSTER

UNICEF estimated there were 100 million street children a decade ago in 2005. But data is not collected by the UN or any other international body on their numbers – so we do not know how many children worldwide depend on the streets for their survival or development. In each country, numbers can vary by city and from one year to the next. Wars, disasters, economic difficulties, religious/ethnic or other clashes can all trigger a sharp rise in numbers. Counting street children can be difficult because they may not want to be found, may be frightened or mistrustful of authorities, may not want to be known as 'street children' or may not have a fixed place to live.

GENDER OF STREET CHILDREN

✗ MYTH

Street children are boys

✓ BUSTER

Evidence does suggest fairly consistently that 75% to 90% of children living on the streets in many countries are boys. But this is not universal – a study in Ghana showed a much more even split between girls and boys. And in many countries, in Mexico for example, there is a more even spread of girls and boys amongst those working on the streets and living with their family. This can be because of gender bias in communities or the wider society.

WHERE ARE STREET CHILDREN?

✗ MYTH

Street children only exist in poor countries

✓ BUSTER

Street-connected children can be found in most countries, both rich and poor. There are more reports of street children in countries and regions where social and economic inequalities are high. In the UK, street children are more commonly known as runaways or detached youth. In the USA and Canada they are included in street youth. The nature and degree of children's connections to the streets in richer countries may be different to those in developing countries, but they have many experiences in common.

STREET CHILDREN AS VICTIMS

✗ MYTH

Street children are victims

✓ BUSTER

All street children experience constant and direct exposure to violence and some will even die as a result. Violence can also be a factor in pushing them onto the street, perhaps through family violence or war. Once on the street, violence is also a challenge: street children have repeatedly reported suffering violence at the hands of adults, the police and other street children. Although street children are constantly vulnerable to numerous dangers on the street, they are also resourceful and often resilient individuals. Street children actively make their own connections with the street: they build friendships and survival networks, even homes there and many earn a living for themselves, siblings and sometimes for their whole family on the street.

STREET CHILDREN AS CRIMINALS

✗ MYTH

Street children are criminals

✓ BUSTER

To earn a living, survive or spend large amounts of time on the streets, children may need to use tactics different to those used by other children. They may beg or run errands, sell goods and services illegally (or sell goods and services that are inherently illegal). They may loiter, use drugs or sleep in prohibited public spaces or on private property. In criminalising survival behaviours or not taking account of the reasons behind children's involvement in criminal activities, society stigmatises and alienates street children. Street-connected children often see themselves as able to make a positive contribution to society.

THE RIGHTS OF STREET CHILDREN

✗ MYTH

Street children must be rescued from the streets

✓ BUSTER

All children should be able to enjoy their rights, whether they are in private or public spaces. A challenge faced by any street child is being recognised and treated as a holder of rights, as specified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Street children cannot be made to wait for rescue before they have their rights fulfilled. In addition, evidence suggests that children who are 'rescued' or taken off the streets, rather than supported through a negotiated process of gaining access to services, often return to the streets because underlying challenges have not been resolved.

STREET CHILDREN AND SUBSTANCE USE

✗ MYTH

Street children who take drugs do not deserve support

✓ BUSTER

Some street-connected children engage in substance use to cope with trauma, mental illness, hunger, stigmatisation and discrimination, or other punishing realities of daily life on the street. Some children in street situations find other ways to cope. The choice of coping mechanism is not a deciding factor in whether a child is deserving or not of society's support – all children need some support from society.

SUPPORT FOR STREET CHILDREN

✗ MYTH

All that street children need is a chance to go to school

✓ BUSTER

Street children almost always struggle to integrate into 'standard' children's programmes because they live transient lives and often need to work during times when support services are available. They also struggle with the attendance requirements, routine and discipline of formal education and become frustrated that the topics taught are irrelevant to their lives. They can experience discrimination in class for being behind their peers and having limited family support means that they fail to do homework or be presentable for school. As a result they cannot simply enrol in formal education and benefit from it – the highest numbers of school drop-outs are street children. Programmes run by Governments or big international institutions/NGOs are usually unsuitable for street children as they also do not provide a tailored approach. Street children need specialised interventions that can respond to and address the complexity of the issues they face.