RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring street children resilience during COVID-19 in South Africa: an exploratory literature review

Karabo Mohapanele, [iD] Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Pretoria, South Africa, karabomohapanele@gmail.com

Tendai Makwara, [iD], Boston City Campus, Stellenbosch, Cape Town, South Africa, makwara.t@gmail.com

Abstract

This exploratory literature review study explored the resilience of street children during COVID-19. The paper applied a narrative, exploratory literature review methodology and consulted academic and non-academic sources to extract data relevant to answering the research questions. Findings indicate that the pandemic added another layer of challenges that negatively affected the welfare of street children. Additionally, results reveal that no specially targeted COVID-19 interventions were implemented to cater to street children's needs. Thus, they had to survive by exploiting their resilient attributes. In light of these findings, it is argued that street children's resilience enables them to survive difficult periods. Furthermore, the paper highlights the shortsightedness of the COVID-19 intervention in overlooking the needs of specific populations with unique needs. Lastly, the paper recommends that for future pandemics like COVID-19, specific measures are required to cater to street children's economic and public health needs.

1 Introduction

It is common cause the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the livelihood patterns of many population groups, one of which is street children. The plight of street children during the pandemic is a cause for concern considering their status as a vulnerable group whose numbers have been steadily increasing. Literature attributes the increasing number of street children globally to a lack of adequate social infrastructure and socio-economic programs (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022), problems of rapid urbanisation, weakening family structures, effects of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, increased poverty levels and changing social dynamics about how society takes care of its vulnerable populations. In South Africa, like anywhere else, many children without a home consider the streets a shelter (Manomano et al. 2021), with about 250,000 children and adolescents living in the streets (Maepa, 2021; Hills et al. 2016). Kawala, Kirui and Cumber (2020) write that street children are quite dynamic, and the exact numbers are difficult to establish. The Consortium Group (2020) added that a commonly quoted figure for the worldwide street children population is 100 million. Arguably given their large population size, inherent vulnerabilities and potency to act as vectors for further viral transmissions of the COVID-19 virus if left unattended, street children warranted special attention as countries devised strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Moreover, it is likely that COVID-19 also drove many children into the streets, as hunger, evictions, and poverty took a toll on families. Hence, conscious of these realities, the United Nations (2020) stipulated that specific protections must be put in place for street children as a vulnerable population in response to the pandemic.

However, despite the caveats that homeless children deserved specific protections against COVID-19, it appears the government remained unmoved. In fact, the South African COVID-19 regulations did not recognise streets as a "home" for this population group, meaning street children could be criminalised for being in their "homes". Moreover, Katz et al. (2021) reported that social workers, one of the critical social arms in serving the needs of homeless children, were not classified as essential workers during the hard lockdown period, further demonstrating policy ineptitude towards the plight of homeless children. Thus, in

the absence of deliberately targeted interventions and programs to cater for them, the question of how they navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic becomes of interest. This article aims to address this interest by answering the following questions: (1)What were the challenges street children experienced during the pandemic? and What steps did street children take to cushion themselves from the effects of the pandemic?

2 Literature Review

2.1 What is a Homeless/ Street Child?

There is a diversity of opinions concerning homeless and street children, as seen through the various definitions. Among these, Maepa (2021), defined street children as people under the age of 18 who are living on the streets alone without any parental or adult supervision.. The South African Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 defines a street child as a child who (a) has left their home, family, or community due to abuse, neglect, poverty, community upheaval, or any other reason; or (b) due to inadequate care, begs or works on the streets but comes home at night. (Department of Social Development, n.d). According to the United Nations, "any boy or girl... for whom the street in the broadest sense of the word... has become his or her habitual abode and source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults" is considered to be a "street child." As a result, this would apply to all children found on the street. These children must have been seen spending a significant amount of time on the street (Owoaje et al. 2009). Elsewhere street children have been categorised as children on the street (individuals working on the street throughout the day, then returning to their households in the evening as well as children of the street (the individuals residing full time in the street and are not in communication with their parents. This article explains the concepts of street children and homeless children through these multiple perspectives. In so doing, we submit to Ndoromo, Österman and Björkqvist's (2017) thesis that the street children concept is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing children on the street, children in the street, and children of the street.

2.2 Everyday challenges faced by street children

Mukherjee (2014) claims that street children live trapped in a cycle of poverty-violence-abuse, which explains why they are likely to exhibit complex behavioural issues. They are also predisposed to psychosocial problems, including substance use and glue sniffing, exposure to violence and aggression, being victims of rape, violence, different acts of aggression, and human trafficking. Amdeselassie, Emirie, Iyasu et al. (2020) noted that street children are highly vulnerable to verbal, physical and sexual violence, lack food security, abuse drugs and are likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours. Those street children who engage in sexual activity often lack access to sexual and reproductive health services, placing them at risk of developing sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). They are also prone to untimely deaths due to hunger, lack of care, violence and drug overdose (Maepa, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2000) believe that many of these problems emanate from the absence of parental care and supervision, which is essential for healthy child development. Coren, Hossain, Pardo, et al. (2013) stressed that the street children and homeless children phenomenon is driven by various societal failures that include increased levels of instability and dissolution of parental unions, weakening family support systems for child care and monitoring, a high prevalence of parents' deaths related to HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and child maltreatment.

Ward and Seager (2010) reiterated that household disturbances such as domestic violence, abuse, and poor family relationships led some children to escape to the streets. In the same vein, there are stories of girl children subjected to sexual abuse by their stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends, or male relatives who ended up in the streets as a way out of those traumatic situations. Arguably the carryover effect of such traumas later compromises the success of family recovery initiatives such as family reunion programs. Similarly, Mokomane and Makoae (2017) conducted an overview study of street children programs offered by shelters in South Africa. They noted that the need for money, peer pressure, search for food and freedom from family or parental control pulled many children into the streets. However, being in the streets exposed these children to risks threatening their mental, social and overall well-being. It also puts them at the mercy of criminals, police and smugglers who integrate them into criminal activities and abuse them.

Incidentally, street children are among the millions of the world's hardest-to-reach children, as many do not attend school. Uthayakumar and Vlamings (2019) opined that their fate seems locked in a system of high drop-out rates from formal education programs.   As a result, many of these children are likely to exhibit psychological, mental and social disorders that put them at a disadvantage compared to other kids living in secure homes. A detailed summary of challenges faced by street children is found in a study by Ndlovu and Tigere (2022) examining the experiences of street children in Harare Metropolitan, Zimbabwe. They range from contending with dehumanising environments, abuse from the police and individuals, economic troubles, exploitation and

discrimination. In short, there is consensus among scholars, practitioners and interested groups that living in the streets exposes street children to all possible vagaries of life, some of which are minimised if children stay home. In that sense, the problem of street children is considered undesirable in many societies.

2.3 Challenges faced by street children during the COVID-19 pandemic

Rosenthal et al. (2020) state that COVID-19 naturally added a new layer of risks for children living in the streets from how it destabilised existing social and economic order. COVID-19 virus impaired children's health, and social and material well-being, with homeless and street children as the hardest hit groups (Manomano et al., 2021). For millions of young African children, coronavirus mitigation measures distanced them from more accessible access to food, water and shelter. Manomano et al. (2021) found that COVID-19 management regulations in South Africa were insensitive as they threatened to remove homeless children from the streets. Olanipekun (2020) interviewed street children about their COVID-19 experience in Nigeria. One participant stated:

' I am used to suffering "o", but I have never experienced anything like this before. "Aaah" suffering after suffering sir. People don't come to give us food anymore, and we don't get jobs because people don't want to have contact with us. When we approach them to assist with their luggage in exchange for money, they scream at us not to come close and to not touch them.'

The Consortium Group (2020) examined the plight of the street and homeless children during COVID-19 and noted several challenges they encountered. They included street children being criminalised for flouting lockdown rules. Moreover, it was observed that many organisations had been forced to cease doing outreach programs for street children due to public health restrictions, including campaigns to raise awareness of the problem and solutions. As a result, street children could not access essential health education information. As similarly observed by Manomano et al. (2021), the Consortium Group (2020) cited issues of violence and sexual and physical abuse suffered by street children at the hand of law enforcement personnel. Additionally, hunger and malnutrition among street children increased, primarily due to the loss of income, erratic and irregular work and the closure of residential institutions, drop-in centres, and schools that previously offered free meals.

Elsewhere Pietkiewicz-Pareek (2021) explored the lives of street children in India and found similar experiences as reported afore. Importantly, the study highlighted a common challenge regarding a lack of reliable, quantifiable data on the number of coronavirus cases among street children, reinforcing assertions that they were a discounted community among other populations. In that sense, they hardly enjoyed access to coronavirus testing centres and received Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). From this perspective, street children remained an active virus transmission agent in the fight against the coronavirus as they remain outside the focus of government intervention programs. Furthermore, Ndorom and Banyanga (2021) dealt with a case study of street children in South Sudan during the pandemic. Some of their findings revealed that street children lacked access to clean water, medical care, and shelter.

Additionally, because of their underlying poor health due to living in filthy conditions, street children were more likely to experience health complications. Furthermore, they were subjected to discriminatory and cruel treatment by people who feared they could transmit the COVID-19 virus. In the same vein, they also claimed that on the street, children are ordinarily marginalised by communities and seen as pariahs (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). Thus although some of the findings from these studies account for daily experiences, it is undeniable that their intensity increased under COVID-19, mainly as societies sought to adjust and protect themselves from the pandemic. The presentation of the assessments must be based on independent individual achievements.

2.4 Street children survival strategies during COVID-19

Past studies conducted in South Africa reckon that street children are resilient. For example, studies by Hill et al. (2016) in Durban and Malindi and Theron (2010) in Free State and Gauteng found evidence that street children drew resilience strength from peer groups and religiosity, among other mechanisms. However, street children's resilience in the country remains relatively under-researched. As yet, there is yet be a clear account of street children coping mechanisms, especially in pandemic situations. Hence this study sought to answer the question: How do street children cope with daily challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Contemporary studies argue that surviving in the street is a challenging experience, and street children's choices are driven by necessity rather than choice.   Ali (2011) alluded to group solidarity, autonomy, control, and creative, effective problem-solving, even manipulation strategies as survival techniques street children employ to make ends meet. Ordinarily,

street children engage in risky behaviours such as survival sex and crime in the form of car/housebreaking while also occupying empty buildings for shelter to make ends meet. Becoming members of street gangs and participating in illegal activities also allow street children to gain social acceptance among peers (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). Mampane, Omidire and Ebersöhn (2021) similarly stressed the importance of belonging to gangs as a source of resilience among street children. Street children also relied on personal character and emotional strength, cultural values, and religious beliefs as sources of resilience in line with Maepa's (2021) that prayer and friendships enlightened the hopes of these children.

Bhukuth and Ballet (2015) added that street children often work as food vendors and perform menial tasks ranging from car washing, rag picking, shoe shining and restaurant work. Regrettably, due to countrywide lockdowns, and the need for social distancing, many of these street careers disappeared, further compounding their economic challenges. The Consortium for Street Children (2020) adds that in Tanzania, street children s helped one another by gathering and disseminating knowledge about the illness, as well as by directly seeking medical attention or informing social workers in case their peers showed COVID-19 symptoms. These street children also replaced their sense of hopelessness with solidarity. In line with these resilience strategies, Olanipekun (2020) interviewed one of the street children in Nigeria, who provided the following response:

'Nobody tells us anything. But we hear side talks about the situation of things now. So, we do what we see people do. That is why we are using masks too. We usually pick the mask we see by the road. We don't go out again like before. All of us sleep and wake up here and hope that people bring food so we can eat.'

Fouche, Fouche and Theron (2020) conducted an alternate rapid review study on child protection and resilience in the face of COVID-19 in South Africa and noted legislative provisions enabling access to psychosocial support services, protected and temporary housing, family reunification programs for street children. Similarly, the authorities in Senegal partnered with the United Nations to facilitate the placement of street children in alternative families in addition to family reunification and to house them in temporary shelters (United Nations, 2022). However, in South Africa, it appears that intervention by the government targeted the broader community of people living in the streets, including children. This is evident from various accounts in the mainstream media (Kamnqa, 2020; Green, 2020) detailing government actions to establish temporary shelters for homeless people. Arguably, these strategies meant that street children found themselves in a situation where they had to compete with an adult population for access to COVID-19 relief resources availed at these temporary shelters, including PPEs, food and drugs. Consequent to such lack of targeted intervention for street children and secured access to COVID-19 relief measures that could encourage them to stay in these temporary shelters, it is not surprising that street children were seen loitering the streets against lockdown regulations in search of survival means.

2.5 Theoretical framework

To explore the coping strategies and resilience attributes of the street and homeless children during COVID-19, this paper applied a resilience theoretical perspective. Ali (2011) claimed that there is no better place to observe children's resilience than on the street, suggesting that resilience theory is synchronous with street survival attributes. Ali further elaborates that Conticini and Hulme (2007) called street children's survival a 'display' of coping strategies. The idea of coping strategies is generally understood to refer to behavioural and cognitive tactics to manage crises, akin to Masten's (2001) assertion that resilience theory speaks to a person's capacity to overcome, successfully adapt to, or handle adversity. This idea resonated with considerable literature on street children, which argues that they (street children) exhibit socialised resilience tendencies, given that they can function and survive in the peripheries of society. For example, Malindi (2014) contends that street children purposefully develop resilience in the context of risk and adversity, like COVID-19. Similarly, Alli (2011) claimed that talking about resilience in the context of street children indicates constant struggle and danger in their daily lives. Given these perspectives, there is a stronger claim that the resilience concept provides a theoretical lens to explore the perils that confront street children and the ways they cope with these challenges.

3 Methodology

This is a narrative, exploratory literature review study. We used Google and Google Scholar databases to search for related literature. Using Google scholar was justified by the fact that the database is convenient as it is freely available once one has access to the Internet (Harzing & van der Wal, 2008). Our decision to consider both scholarly and non-scholarly sources was informed by that the COVID-19 topic and street children issues attract the interest of various entities like non-governmental organisations and health agencies, whose contributions can assist in answering the research questions. Moreover there is also limited scholarly outputs exploring COVID-19 and street children dynamics, given that COVID-19 is a reasonably recent phenomenon. As such, relying only on scholarly literature would present a limited view. Thus we reviewed publicly available literature, including

scholarly publications and institutional papers relevant to challenges faced by homeless street children and resilience capabilities during COVID-19. We, therefore, used the non-systematic exploratory literature review approach with a narrative bias consistent with Paré and Kitsiou's (2017) claims that a narrative review attempts to summarise or synthesise what has been written on a particular topic but does not seek generalisation or cumulative knowledge from what is reviewed.

Table 1. Literature sources

Type of source	Quantity
Journal articles	23
Online websites	4
Institutional publications/reports	6
Legislation	1
Book Chapter	2
Total	36

4 Results and Discussion

All the 36 literature sources used in the study cited street children's resilience and challenges. Three themes of street children resilience resources during COVID-19 were identified from the findings, namely remaining in the streets, staying in temporary shelters, and reuniting with families.

Table 2. Summary of challenges and sources of resilience during COVID 19

Challenges during COVID 19	Sources of resilience and coping mechanisms
Difficulties in accessing food, water and shelter	**Theme 1: Remaining in the streets** Gang membership
Forced removals from the streets	Personal character and emotional strength cultural values
Social discrimination	
Criminalisation for disobeying lockdowns and curfews	Religious beliefs Friendships and a sense of solidarity
Restricted access to health information and services	Collecting and sharing information about COVID-19
Violence- sexual and physical abuse	**Theme 2: Staying in temporary shelters** Visits by social workers
No PPEs and access to COVID-19 testing facilities	Improvising PPEs Residence in temporary housing,
	Theme 3: Reuniting with Families Family reunification programs Temporary home visits

A literature synthesis reveals numerous challenges confronting street children during the pandemic, forcing them to rely on three main coping strategies: remaining in the streets, staying in temporary shelters, and reuniting with families. Results confirm that COVID-19 added a new layer of risks for children living on the streets (Rosenthal et al., 2020). The pandemic trapped street children with few opportunities to 'work' for their livelihoods and choosing between staying in temporary shelters or reuniting with families who had abused them in some situations. It also sanctioned the criminalisation of patronising the streets during lockdown periods, thus exposing street children to abuse by law enforcement agencies. However, literature also underscores that because they ordinarily live in homeless environments, street children often face numerous social, economic, and health risks that, according to Ali (2011), enjoin them to develop survival skills as adults.

Globally, studies revealed that some street children chose to remain in the streets despite the dangers of contracting the COVID-19 virus and reduced prospects of finding food, money and 'work'. Such reluctance to leave the streets despite changed circumstances suggests that street children can also be considered egoistic individuals who draw their own rules of conduct and life, oblivious of the demands from an external moral authority, as Durkheim opined (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018). Similarly, some street children in South Africa ignored the lockdown measures and remained patronising the streets, also partly motivated by the urge to find survival means. During

the pandemic, street children had to choose between avoiding the risks of contracting the COVID-19 virus by respecting lockdown regulations or perishing from hunger and foregoing earning income to support their families if they did not go out and hustle.

Besides a lack of food, street children faced challenges regarding access to care centres and government support structures like temporary shelters. They also had to contend with discriminatory behaviours from members of society and criminalisation and abuse by the law enforcement agencies tasked with enforcing compliance with COVID-19 regulations. However, even against such external forces and the potential risks of contracting the COVID-19 virus, many chose to remain in the streets. While the need to survive could have been a key driver to remaining in the streets, Hill et al. (2016) nevertheless reasoned that street children often derive pleasure from the freedom they enjoy in the streets and thus may have viewed being in temporary shelters or being reunited with their families as surrendering their freedom. Citing the works of Densley and Joss (2000), Bhukuth and Ballet (2015) argued that by developing an identity with the streets as their home, street children end up viewing their family ties in a negative light. This may explain why family reunion occasions were few and far during the pandemic. Nonetheless, the fact that some street children chose to be reunited with families and stay in emergency shelters during the pandemic instead of continuing to roam in the streets suggests that their resilience is also relative to their perception of situational challenges.

In context results of the study make several contributions to understanding the challenges faced by street children and their dynamic capabilities to develop coping strategies necessary to survive through a pandemic. At the centre of street children's capabilities to survive through any situation is defiance against any alteration of the social order to which they are accustomed. During the pandemic, street children defied pressures from two major forces: the new layer of risks paused by the pandemic (Rosenthal et al. 2020) and the government COVID-19 regulations (Manomano et al. 2021) to remain in the streets. In that sense, these findings imply that street children develop a fixed perception of their vulnerability irrespective of the emergence of new threats like the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper explored the challenges and resourcefulness of street children during COVID-19. The literature revealed that street children faced countless hardships during the pandemic, which forced some to take risks of contracting the coronavirus and going back to the streets, ignoring the national lockdown regulations. The paper shows that COVID-19 regulations designed to protect people ignored the needs of street children. Given their unique social circumstance, we believe that targeted COVID-19 interventions need to be put in place to cater for the needs of street children whose population size in South Africa and globally make them a significant group that can impact the success or failure of public health intervention if ignored. In light of this observation, we recommend that for future pandemics like COVID-19, specific measures are required to cater for their social and public health welfare. Governments/states globally should learn from and adjust pandemic responses aimed at helping street children in future. Their rights must be recognised, and policy implementations affecting their lives must consider their voices.

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