

**Examination of the Street Children of Mexico: A Look into Who They Are, What  
They Do, and How They Connect to the World and to Human Rights.**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Street children in UNICEF's most recent definition is describes street children as as "any girl or boy... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults." <sup>1</sup>Street children a result of economic problems for many countries and Mexico is no exception. Mexico one of the most populated Latin American countries also with a large wealth inequality among their people. For example in Mexico city about forty percent of the population live in poverty<sup>2</sup> and street children are within the poverty population. Mexico's economic inequalities have lead families to make their children work on streets or in worst cases abandon their children. This form of life is not a choice but a results of: international, national, and domestic issues that primary relate to poverty. This examination of Mexican street children focuses on: how society and economy has shaped the lives of street children, what street children survive and cope , and analysis on their human rights. These children are street children because they are victims of the economy and society structures.

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie Black, "Street and Working Children." United Nations Children's Fund, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Alasdair Beverstock, "Reporter's File- The Life of Street Children in Mexico," YouTube Video, 4:43, posted by PressTV News Videos, September 26, 2014

## **Economy and Society Shaping Lives of Street Children**

An economic crisis in the late twentieth century occurred in Mexico like most Latin American countries. These events were bad news for the Mexican economy and the Mexican people since unemployment rates and the need for government aid increased.<sup>3</sup> Government aid increased for programs that benefit families in poverty but often these programs and government could not keep up with their people's needs. The insufficient families incomes lead to families: putting children to work, domestic violence, and sometimes abandoning children. These street children just became a "new burden" for society. Since their livelihood either mostly or all on the streets of Mexico.

## **Street Children Survive and Cope: Poor, Hungry and High**

Street children are at higher risk for danger that later on affects them as adults.<sup>4</sup> Street children are either beggars or wage earners. These children will go through hunger and depression and learn how to cope with drugs but when they do find food it is often a bad source of waste food. This leads to malnutrition, illnesses, or even death. Apart from the bad health exposes they are also exposed to the criminals lives like violence and illegal substances. Society and the government shame people of the streets because they are burdens, "violent", beggars, etc. Many people generalize street children as criminal

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<sup>3</sup> Susana Scottoli, "The Rights of Children and Adolescents In Mexico: Present Day Agenda." United Nations Children's Fund, April 2010

<sup>4</sup> Athena Turdoric-Ghemo, "Life on the Street and the Mental Health of Street Children - A Developmental Perspective." University of Johannesburg, 2005.

and junkies rather than vulnerable children. Discrimination for having a livelihood on the street influences society and human rights of these people.

### **Violations of Rights of Street Children**

Street children are seen as less of citizens because of societal discrimination. Barriers to overcome the status of life they are in are made more impossible to overcome since they do not have the resources. If they do have resources(educations ,programs , etc) only some can obtain the help. In the majority street children feel like “unseen and ignored”.<sup>5</sup> Their human rights violated go in depth in the dossier.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Rights of the Child**

The rights of million of children are violated across the world as they suffer from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. As children, they are unable to fend for themselves without parental support, and are exposed to vulnerabilities that threaten their development into healthy adults. Recent studies have identified more than 40 million children below the age of 15 suffer from abuse and neglect.<sup>6</sup> Children are traditionally seen as possession of the parents rather than individuals with rights. By law, children are

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<sup>5</sup> Alasdair Beverstock, “Reporter’s File- The Life of Street Children in Mexico,” YouTube Video, 4:43, posted by PressTV News Videos, September 26, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> “FACT SHEET: A Summary of the Rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.” United Nations Children’s Fund.

minors and their legal guardians are given the authority over the child regardless of the child's opinion and views on legal issues. In response to these inequalities, the rights of children came into effect that focused on acknowledging and protecting the rights of all children regardless of their background.

It was not until the 19th century that a state finally recognized the rights of children. By 1951, the United Nations adopted a declaration of these basic children's rights. However, it was not until 1989 that the United Nations declared official legislation named Convention on the Rights of Children. The article is composed of 54 articles, three optional protocols, is based on four foundation principles: children should be free from discrimination; government must act in the best interest of the child; child's survival to adulthood is a priority; and the children's views and perspectives are important.<sup>7</sup> Under the convention, the state must act in the best interest of the child regardless their background. The state must provide education, healthcare, and other necessity to all children. They must also protect the child from abuse, discrimination, and exploitation. The Convention on the Rights of Children is the most important protocol regarding children's rights that resulted in more than 150 countries ratified the convention including Mexico.

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<sup>7</sup> "FACT SHEET: A Summary of the Rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child." United Nations Children's Fund.

## **State of the Country**

Like other countries in Latin America, Mexico has a long history of economic problems. Economic crises, such as the “Lost Decade” in the 1980s and the “Mexican Peso Crisis” in the 1990s, has left a huge portion of its populations within poverty lines. These economic crises generated unemployment and increased the number of citizen in need of social assistance. In response to the crisis, the government began adopting neoliberal policies such as privatization of public sectors and its entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement.<sup>8</sup> While the country adopted new policies, Mexico has seen very little economic growth over the past decades. Since 2000, Mexico’s economic performance continues to underperform compared to other Latin American countries. Recent studies show that the poverty rate in Mexico is at a high 45.5%.<sup>9</sup> Despite slow economic growth, Mexico has made steady progress in dealing with issues in poor population.

Since the 1980s, the country has increased its spending on social programs that benefit families in poverty. The government’s main social policy program, called Oportunidades, is considered one of the most important and effective programs aiding families within the poverty line. Under the system, the federal government directly provides cash transfers (thus avoiding corruption) and subsidies to families that live in extreme poverty. Over the years, Oportunidades has undergone several improvements to

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<sup>8</sup> Veronica Ronchi, “The Neoliberal Myth in Latin America: The Cases of Mexico and

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Wislon and Gerardo Silva, “Mexico’s Latest Poverty Stats.” Wilson Center, 2012.

increase its coverage to more families in need. Similarly, the government has adopted a public health care system to increase access to health care to families around the world.

Since ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Children, Mexico has made progress in addressing children's rights. By increasing funding to federal programs, like Seguro Popular de Salud and Oportunidades, the government has improved the welfare of its children population. The government also guarantees free primary education to all children in the country. However, the government still need more effective method to increase its coverage to all of its citizens, specifically to the increasing number of street children.

### **Definition of Street Children**

Since its exposure in the 1980s, street children have become a widely researched topic in across the world. The term "street children" does not have an official definition because of the complexity of the issue. However, the most commonly cited definition comes from UNICEF, in which they define a street child as "any girl or boy... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults."<sup>10</sup> "Street children" is often interpreted as broad term because a vast amount of children fall within its definitions. Street children fall into subcategories, with the two primary being: children

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<sup>10</sup> Maggie Black, "Street and Working Children." United Nations Children's Fund, 1993.

that live on the street and children that work on the streets to support themselves and/or their families. A street-based street child is “of” the street and lives permanently on the streets without any family contact. A home-based street child is “on” the street during the day to work and returns back home at night. Although home-based children maintain contact with their families, they do not get the proper support and protection from their families.

Unfortunately, the absence of an official term and widely generalized definitions has led to problems in researching street children. Researchers and organizations often use their own definition of street children to cater to their specific goals. For example, some organizations choose to exclude home-based street children in their data because they return to their families at the end of the day. Some researchers purposely inflate their data to include a larger amount of children to gain more reputation/attention. In some cases, governments refuse to use the term “street children” to avoid a sympathetic connotation, and use terms such as “children without parent supervisors” (which falls within UNICEF’s definition on street children) when creating legislation. The multiple definitions make it difficult to estimate the amount of street children across the world. According to estimations by UNICEF, there are about 100 million street children across the world, with 40 million residing in Latin America, while the United Nations estimates in the 150 million range. However, organization and



researchers agree that the amount of street children will continue to rise across the world.

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Another common problem of street children gathering reliable data on the phenomenon. It is difficult to keep track of street children because they are constantly on the move. Many children are afraid of discussing their personal lives with researchers and most children that are willing to talk often lie about their lives and give false information about their name, age, and background. In some cases, researchers become too sympathetic towards their subject that results in biased reports on the children.

### **Causes of Street Children**

The causes that lead children into the streets ranged from international, national, and domestic issues that primary relate to poverty. At international level, Mexico has been affected by world recession such as the US financial crisis of 2007-2008 that led to a decline in its economic causing a yearlong recession with high unemployment rates. Nationally, Mexico has a long history of economic crises that mainly affected their lower class. The poverty rate among families results in domestic issues.

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<sup>11</sup> “Street Children: A Mapping and Gapping Review of the Literature 2000 to 2010” Consortium for Street Children, 2012.

Every street child has a different reason for their dependence on the street for livelihood. It was estimated that 75% of street children are home-based.<sup>12</sup> It is common for poor families to bring or send their children to work on the street. The children are usually taught how to earn money by their families, from selling goods to begging for donations, before being left alone to roam the streets. However, this often leads to the child becoming more and more independent from their families. In more extreme cases, children live on the streets due to domestic issues. Conflict with their families, such as physical or emotional abuse, can encourage a child to abandon their homes. Tragedy, such as the death of a parent/legal guardian, can force children to depend on the streets.

A huge amount of street children in Mexico are migrant children from Central and South America.<sup>13</sup> Since the mid-20th century, several Latin American countries, such as Guatemala and El Salvador, suffered both from civil wars and economical crises that lead to a huge increase in migration within their population. Many children in these countries choose to migrate to the United States for several reasons from seeking economic opportunities to seeking their parents. These children travel alone through Mexico facing discrimination and death along the way. The children often face trouble on their journey

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis Aptekar, "Street Children in the Developing World: A Review of Their Condition." San Jose State University, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> "Childhood and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, Policies, Practices, and Challenges." Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, February 2015.

and are forced to depend on the street for livelihood. In some cases, the children do not succeed in their journey and end up living their entire childhood on the streets.

### **Street Children**

By spending their lives on the streets, children are vulnerable to several risk that can affect their development into healthy adults.<sup>14</sup> Most street children resort to working on the streets to earn money, such as becoming street vendors to washing car windows. Without any main source of food, these children must find ways to feed themselves, and rely on unsanitary methods like eating discarded food. Younger street children tend to suffer from malnutrition. Street children (specifically street-based) often sleep in dangerous locations such as sewer systems, empty alley, abandonment cars, or any place that can serve as temporary shelter. Living in the street exposes a child to several health issues that affect them physically and mentally. The leading cause of death for street children are health related issues. Although the child may become sick from a common disease such as the flu, the lack of health care can result in serious health issues that can lead to death. Several street children have completely abandoned their education in favor for a street life. Living in the streets expose the child to violence and illegal substances. In few cases, street children turn to criminal activities such as robbing or joining a gang. Without parental supervision, some street children turn to drugs for temporary bliss. Unfortunately, children develop an addiction to certain drugs that leads to further

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<sup>14</sup> Athena Turdoric-Ghemo, "Life on the Street and the Mental Health of Street Children - A Developmental Perspective." University of Johannesburg, 2005.

problems. The public perception on street children leads to discrimination to these children. Many people generalize street children as criminal and/or junkies rather than seeing them as vulnerable children.

## ANALYSIS

In examining the phenomenon of street children in Mexico, it is clear that the world has much work to do to assist these children—and, if they live with their families, [assist] their families, too—and help them out of the conditions they are forced to live and work in. While it is true this is an extremely complex issue—one that has entwined in it political, economic, social, and cultural ideas and beliefs—it is possible to combat this growing phenomenon. Before these areas can be tackled, though, the question of *who* ‘human rights’ should extend to must be addressed, as many people around the world see human beings as more or less worthy of such rights based on what they have or have not done. With these things in mind, the political, economic, and social spheres of various countries can be examined for any areas that hinder or prohibit the protection and support of any street children they have. In addition to this, measures can be taken to ensure that—if there are no street children in a particular country—there will be no children that have to resort to living and/or working on the streets to support themselves and/or their families. Fortunately, individuals and organizations whose goal it is to assist street children do exist and are becoming increasingly more common, especially in areas that

are most impacted by this phenomenon. Governments are also doing what they can to help these children off the streets—albeit not always in supportive ways—and there are programs being created to empower children and steer them toward more opportunities. As the number of street children continue to grow worldwide, so too does the amount of support for these children. In accordance with the UN Rights Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is the hope that all nations—regardless of political, economic, social, or cultural differences—will “[recognize] the importance of international co-operation for improving the living conditions of children in every country.”<sup>15</sup>

For about 150 million of children around the world,<sup>16</sup> living and/or working on the street is their reality. Such was the case for Enrique (from Sonia Nazario’s book Enrique’s Journey), who worked as a child to support his family, fled his home in Honduras in search of his mother in the US, and spent his days and nights on the streets where he faced danger and violence.<sup>17</sup> Having struggled through life as a child who had to sell food and spices to help pay for his family’s expenses, Enrique fell into drug use to cope with his internal and external problems—much like many street children find themselves doing. As a result, they are seen as criminals and undesirable citizens who “bring disease, prostitution, and crime and take away jobs” (Nazario 79). Because of this, street children are not often given protection by authorities or by their government, who

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<sup>15</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child. *United Nations*. 1990. Print.

<sup>16</sup> “Street Children.” *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization*. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/fight-against-discrimination/education-of-children-in-need/street-children/>

<sup>17</sup> Sonia Nazario. *Enrique’s Journey*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007. 79.

instead throw the children in prison or punish them in ways that can lead to death.<sup>18</sup> These children are not seen as innocent or helpless children who are forced into lives of destitution and have limited means of overcoming them, but are instead shunned and unwanted by much of their respective societies. Like adults who face capital punishment for their crimes, street children are deemed (by many) to be unworthy of a status equal to that of “good” human beings, and are thus denied basic human rights—even though that is direct violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In Mexico, the plight of street children can be seen everyday. Marred in the past and recent years by political unrest, economic troubles, and social upheaval, Mexico and its citizens have experienced much turmoil—especially street children, who are already one of the most vulnerable groups in Mexico. Having to depend largely on the sympathy of strangers for money, food, or other living necessities, street children’s lives are put at greater risk in times when the country faces any sort of turmoil. During times of economic downturn, for example, many people struggle to support themselves and their own families and cannot give any assistance—no matter how small—to a street child in need. During times of political unrest, street protests may elicit violence, putting street children right in the middle of the danger. The lives and well-being of street children, then, are tied into the societies in which they live and the social environment surrounding them.

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<sup>18</sup> Police Abuse and Killings of Street Children in India. *Human Rights Watch*. 1996. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/India4.htm>. Web.

Fortunately, there are local and international individuals, organizations, and government programs that work to assist street children and help them establish safer and better lives. In Mexico, for example, Casa Alianza [Mexico] was established in 1988 to support and care for boys and girls who have “experienced extraordinary trauma”<sup>19</sup> through its many programs such as the five small homes they offer for youth to stay at, its Independent Youth Program, and its toll-free hotline (open 24 hours a day) that serves as a crisis hotline for youth across the country. In other nations, shelters have been established to cater for children and youth, and government initiatives—such as the 1992 UN Resolution on the Plight of Street Children—have been put into motion to alleviate the problems faced by street children. With these such programs as well as the increasing number of support systems available to street children, there is hope that this phenomenon will substantially decrease in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Street children are a worldwide phenomenon that will continue to increase over the next few years. Street children are vulnerable to human rights violations that are covered under the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Fortunately, countries across the world including Mexico, has acknowledged the rising problem and has increased its efforts in aiding street children. As the government continues to increase its social

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<sup>19</sup> Casa Alianza Mexico. 1988. <http://www.casa-alianza.org/casas/mexico>.

spending and cooperation with NGOs, the street children phenomenon can begin decreasing in number.



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