

Street Children of Bolivia

By John Eggen

Introduction

Street children are a worldwide reality. In 1986, the United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs estimated between 30 and 170 million street children worldwide.^{i[1]} In 1994 UNICEF estimated that there are 72,000 street children in Bolivia alone.^{ii[2]} The definitions of street children vary, however a more specific statistic is UNICEF's



2004 report that there are at least “2,500 children living on the streets of major cities”^{iii[3]} in Bolivia.

The broadest definition of a street child is “any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults”^{iv[4]} The UNICEF definition of street children provides additional clarity by creating three classifications: Candidates for the Street, Children on the Street, and Children of the Street.^{v[5]} Children *on* the street are those with a tendency of working on the streets during the day and returning to a home at night. Children *of* the street more closely fit the Inter-NGO definition, and are children living on the streets without any functional family support. They have no home to return to, and often do not have any

family protection or supervision. This paper will specifically discuss the Children *of* the streets of Bolivia.

Who are the “Children of the Streets”

The children of the street are negatively viewed by society. They are most often viewed as delinquents, criminals, drug addicts, and simply the rubbish of society. Societies around the globe rarely refer to them as children, but have selected words such as “urchins, little bugs, little criminals, fruit birds, dirty faces, vermin, mosquitoes or little farts.”^{vi[6]} As one author puts it, “Society at large believes that street children are a group of irredeemable delinquents who represent a moral threat to a civilized society – a threat that must be exorcised.”^{vii[7]}

Consequently, children of the street are often mistreated. In one of the more noticed cases in 1995, when five children were killed by police in Brazil a majority of the public approved of the actions. A community survey taken a week later showed that 15% continued to endorse the actions.^{viii[8]} In 1993, TIME International reported “Because they [street children] are increasingly blamed for the rising crime rate in Brazil’s cities, they have now become prey: an average of four a day are killed.”^{ix[9]}

The children of the street are regularly extorted, abused, raped and killed by society. One report indicates that the average age a girl of the street *first* experiences rape is at 13.8 years old. The same report indicates 44% of girls of the street will be raped and 40% of girls will resort to prostitution at some point in time.^{x[10]} In a recent study from Bolivia, 95% of the street children surveyed reported some type of abuse by police such as derogatory comments, rape, financial extortion, and physical beating. Twenty percent of those surveyed had been sexually abused.^{xi[11]}

Many countries have laws protecting the rights of all children, however the effectiveness of these laws often leave much to be desired. In Bolivia law requires that all children receive medical treatment at hospitals, yet over half (53%) of the street children reported health problems.^{xiii[12]} Although legally required, such services are often outside of the reach of the street children. “Health services are rarely geared to the needs of street children. They are often run at times and places that make them inaccessible.”^{xiii[13]}

The children of the street are misunderstood and their stories are not known. Contrary to popular opinion, their lives are not typically characterized by crime and amoral activities. As one author writes, “despite the popular assumption that street children are all thieves, scant



Street Boy in Bolivia Sniffs Paint Thinner

evidence exists about illegal activities.”^{xiv[14]} Their drug use (88% of Bolivian street children sniff paint thinner^{xv[15]}) is rarely the cause of them being on the streets, but a necessary reality of surviving on the street. Drug use is, for them, one of their many coping mechanisms. A typical coping mechanism among the girls is cutting. These coping mechanisms provide way of sustaining the police brutality, the rapes, the cold, and forgetting about their past. These children are not delinquents needing punishment; they are children in need of society’s help.



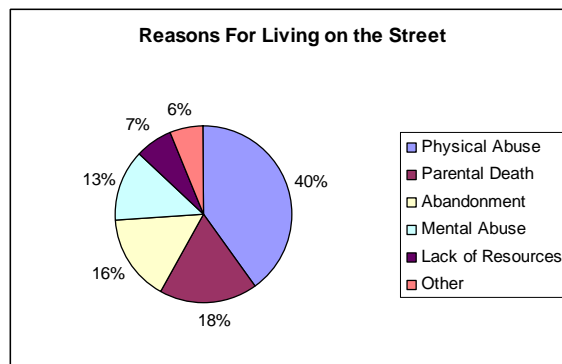
Society often characterizes the street children themselves as the cause of their conditions. Many see life on a street as a child's escape from reality and an attempt to live an easy life. One author generalizes this viewpoint

writing, "Those who have this perception [that they live a free and easy life] see the children living only for the moment, as if they are immersed in continual play."^{xvi[16]}

However tempting it is to consider the freedom of the street something making street life desirable, we are reminded that there is nothing desirable about street life. A 1997 survey "asked girls *of* the street and girls *on* the street what they perceived the results are of having lived on the streets might be... no positive aspects of life on the street were mentioned."^{xvii[17]}

Most street children have suffered a difficult life prior to living on the streets. A large majority of street children come from poor families; however poverty is not the sole factor of becoming a child of the street.^{xviii[18]} The results of a survey of Bolivian street children show that only 7% of children are living on the streets as a direct result of

poverty. The children stated that they became street youth due to physical abuse (40%), parental death (18%), abandonment (16%), mental abuse (13%), and lack of financial resources to support them (7%).^{xix[19]}



The children do not live on the street because they are immoral or want a “free” life. In most cases children live on the street as a result of amoral conditions in society. They are not a problem of society, but are reflective of society’s problems.

A Response to Street Children

The reality is that these are not just working children, as bad as that is, but children living in the street. They are effectively orphans – abandoned by their families and societies. They are abused, and taken advantage of through physical violence, and extortion. The Church must make this acknowledgement both to take an honest account of the world, and as a simple acknowledgement of the humanity of these children. The children are not abused, mistreated and poorly cared for due to any fault of their own, but due to sin in society, and the Church’s failure to speak out against injustice.

After better understanding lives of street children, the Church must respond to the situation. In discussing sin, Gutiérrez names the results of sin as poverty, injustice, and oppression and associates sin with a refusal “to love one’s neighbors and, therefore, the Lord himself.” Therefore the injustice displayed so clearly in the reality of street children, are a clear indication of sin and a failure to love the Lord. The church should not avoid the inherent conflicts involved in the pursuit of justice; rather face the conflicts and work on behalf of the oppressed.

Scripture presents a clear message of caring for the orphan and the widow. Although conflicting scripture can be found for many issues, there is agreement throughout scripture to work for the liberation of the oppressed, care for those in need and protect children. In the Gospels, Christ shows a clear affinity towards children. One

might summarize Christ's teaching on children with an affirmative and negative command. First, Christ calls his disciples to welcome Him through the welcoming of children. (Matthew 18:5, Mark 9:37, Luke 9:48) The second command given is through a warning against keeping the children from Christ, or causing a child to sin. (Matthew 19:13-14, Mark 10:13-14)

Given the adverse conditions and treatment of street children one might argue that society has failed to welcome street children as Christ would be welcomed. Street children have been turned away through the inconvenience of services, through abuse by authorities, and for a lack of genuine concern. To welcome a street child requires more than a simple provision of physical needs. To welcome a street child means to embrace their experiences and acknowledge their past. It is a realization of their abandonment, their abuse and their fears. To welcome a street child means to make them a part of a family, to provide a holistic care for their physical, societal, educational and psychological needs.

Conditions on the street make it difficult for a child to understand a reality of a loving God. Allowing for the continuation of such conditions is, through inaction, keeping these children from knowing God. If the Church takes serious its role of evangelism, the church must be serious about improving the conditions of these children. Evangelism must come through the loving actions of the Church.

Although Protestantism places a strong focus on salvation through grace alone, scripture indicates an important role for the pursuit of justice. In Micah 6:8, the prophet asks, "And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Also in James 1:27, "Religion that God our Father accepts

as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” For those Protestants who consider all of scripture the inspired *Word of God*, these passages must also be considered, showing that the pursuit of justice is critical component of a faith life.

Street Children are a reflection of a much bigger problem. While it is easy to argue for advocacy on behalf of these children, one might argue that it is more important to address the larger issue of poverty. As one author warns, “Focusing attention on street children can thus lead agencies to overlook or ignore the much larger problem of urban- and rural-poverty.”^{xx[20]} Another author suggests, “To be successful, interventions should address the needs of families as well as children and aim at long-term change rather than short-term solutions.”^{xxi[21]} There is no real disagreement that street children are the result of urban poverty, and larger societal issues. The problem with taking this approach, however, is that it is both too future oriented, and too impersonal.

The results of the study in Bolivia suggest an effective change in the life of a street child is often the result of quick intervention. The article states that, “it is suspected that the child’s most dynamic phase of change may be during the preadolescent years and less than two to four years on the streets.

There may be a small window of time in which an abandoned street child has the greatest rehabilitative potential.”^{xxii[22]} A

child is only a child for a relatively short amount of time. The chances of transformation of a street child’s life decreases with the amount of time spent on the streets. As a child reminded the U.N. in a special session on children, “You call us the future, but we are



also the present.”^{xxiii[23]} While there is focus on developing infrastructure, reducing debt, and taking steps to alleviate the broader problem of poverty, children are dying on the streets. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.homelesskids.org/bolivia.htm>, 11/12/04).

In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Christian community is called to a personal response to injustice. The World Council of Church publication, Baptism, Eucharist, and the Ministry, presents an ecumenical agreement on the meaning of the Eucharist developed through over fifty years of dialogue between the three-hundred plus members of the WCC. In outlining the meaning of the Eucharist, the document calls for a personal involvement in issues of social justice. One article states, “The Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God and is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life”^{xxiv[24]} This statement reminds the church that those celebrating in the Eucharist are proclaiming solidarity with the worldwide body of Christ. What is the concern of Bolivia parish is the concern of a parish in the United States. In the Eucharist there is no “future” solution, or any remote solution; only a present and worldwide solution. The solution must be personal, and it must be enacted through the worldwide church body. The meaning of the Eucharist is continued with an affirmation of an active involvement in social justice. “As participants in the Eucharist, therefore, *we prove inconsistent* if we are not *actively participating* in this ongoing restoration of the world’s situation and the human condition.”^{xxv[25]}

The Church therefore is called to play an *active role* in the lives of street children. The Church is called to do so as a response to the sin in the world. This response is part

of keeping Christ's commandment to welcome children. Through enacting social justice, the Church shares Christ's love with the children of the street. Finally, through the celebration of the Eucharist, the church is called to an active participation as the brother and sister of the children of the street. This is not an issue to be solved by the church "there" or through addressing "larger" issues. Rather this is an issue to be actively addressed by the worldwide church.

This response must be holistic, caring for the needs of a *child of the street*. These needs are, by nature, going to be different than that of a traditional orphan. As indicated earlier, most street children are not true orphans, but are effectively abandoned by their families and society. Therefore a ministry to street children must make an extraordinary commitment to the child to overcome the lack of commitment on the part of the child's family and society.

There must also be an active participation on the part of the street children. The children have spoken out, and must be listened to. When asked by a missionary in La Paz, Bolivia, the street children asked for three things. They responded: "We want you to be present in our lives," "We want a home that you are part of," "We want our voices to be heard and our lives to be understood." The street children asked, effectively, for an adult commitment to their lives, a safe home, and societal awareness of who they are. Another author suggests that a program for street children should seek to change the condition, capabilities, and awareness of street children.

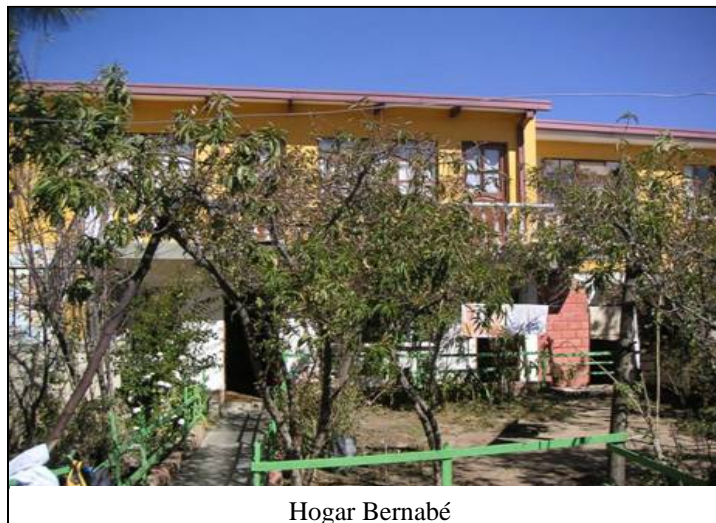
Any response to street children must be willing to listen to and tell their stories. It must be fully committed to the lives of these children, and willing to address their needs. There must also be a willingness to embrace the maturity that the street has forced upon

these children. As the street children themselves remind the U.N. “We are not the sources of problems; we are the resources that are needed to solve them. We are not expenses; we are investments. We are not just young people; we are people and citizens of this world.”^{xxvi[26]}

The Bolivian Street Children Project

One organization working for the lives of street children is the Bolivian Street Children Project. The Bolivian Street Children project is self-described as, “A collaborative effort of people and organizations working together to make a difference in the lives of marginalized children. Our current goal is to abolish child homelessness in La Paz, Bolivia. We do this by helping street children get off the streets, and advocating for children and their rights. Our desire is to mobilize a broad group of individuals, working together to eradicate marginalized society by addressing one small child at a time.”

Seeking to be faithful to the children of the street, and a Christian calling the Bolivian Street Children project founded Hogar Bernabé, a home for former street boys, in 2001. The home is located in La



Paz, Bolivia and was founded in response to the request of the children. Unlike a traditional orphanage the home has a high staff to child ration (6/10 at full capacity.) The

combination of a dedicated staff and small size creates a strong family environment in Hogar Bernabé.

Often, after deciding to move into Hogar Bernabé, many boys will test the commitment of the staff. Having become accustomed to abandonment by their families and others, they boy will run away from the home in order to be pursued. The staff of the home will go out on the streets at night in order to find the boy and bring him back into the house. On the third time the boy is asked to make a permanent decision to stay in the home or return to the streets.

In addition to the family environment, there is a commitment to the development of each of the boys. Each boy is responsible for chores to maintain the house. They have their own beds, clothing and books. In order to develop the *capacity* of the boys, the home has a private tutor. When first entering the home the boys are tutored in the morning and afternoon until reaching their grade level. They then receive 3 hours of tutoring each morning in addition to public schooling.

The Bolivian Street Children project has committed to making a radical social change in the lives of the street children of Bolivia. The ministry seeks to radically change the conditions of these street children by providing a safe, encouraging, and family living environment. The ministry is committed to developing the capacities of the boys through education. And the ministry seeks to tell the stories of these boys through the publication of academic articles and books.

The Bolivian Street Children Project alone cannot alleviate the problem of street children. The Church is called to work together, in many different areas, to alleviate the social problems leading to street children. As one group works for the liberation of the

poor and oppressed, another works in the lives of individual children. Called together as disciples as Christ, celebrating our unity in the Eucharist, the body of Christ must continue to play an active role in the lives of the children of the street.

Links: [Bolivian Street Children Project](#)
[BSCP Overview Presentation](#)

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- ^{i[1]} Tomkins Scanlon, et. al., "Street Children in Latin America," *Education and Debate*
- ^{ii[2]} Barreda Huang, et. al., "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street Children and Formerly Abandoned Street Children in La Paz, Bolivia," *Archives of Childhood Disease* (London), In Press - March 2004
- ^{iii[3]} UNICEF - At a glance: Bolivia - The big picture,
"Http://Www.Unicef.Org/Infobycountry/Bolivia.Html," *UNICEF*, 2004
- ^{iv[4]} Inter-NGO, 1985
- ^{v[5]} Christopher Williams and Who are "Street Children?" A Hierarchy of Street Use and Appropriate Responses, "Child Abuse and Neglect," *17* (1993), 831-841
- ^{vi[6]} Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ^{vii[7]} Tomkins, "*Street Children in Latin America*"
- ^{viii[8]} Derek Summerfield, "If Children's Lives are Precious, Which Children?," *The Lancet* 351 (June 27, 1998)
- ^{ix[9]} Kevin Lalor, "Street Children: A Comparative Perspective," *Child Abuse & Neglect* (USA) 23, 8 (1999)
- ^{x[10]} Lalor, "Street Children"
- ^{xi[11]} Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ^{xii[12]} Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ^{xiii[13]} Tomkins, "*Street Children in Latin America*"
- ^{xiv[14]} Tomkins, "*Street Children in Latin America*"
- ^{xv[15]} Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ^{xvi[16]} Lewis Aptekar, "Characteristics of the Street Children of Colombia," *Child Abuse & Neglect* (USA) 13 (1989)
- ^{xvii[17]} Lalor, "Street Children"
- ^{xviii[18]} Marcela Raffaelli, "The Family Situation of Street Youth in Latin America: A Cross-National Review," *International Social Work* 40 (January, 1997)
- ^{xix[19]} Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ^{xx[20]} Catherine Panter-Brick, "Street Children, Human Rights, and Public Health: A Critique and Future Directions," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, 147-171
- ^{xxi[21]} Raffaelli, "The Family Situation of Street Youth in Latin"
- ^{xxii[22]} Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ^{xxiii[23]} United Nations, *Special Session on Children - UNICEF*,
<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/documentation/childrens-statement.htm>: May, 2002
- ^{xxiv[24]} World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982)
- ^{xxv[25]} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxvi[26]} United Nations, *Special Session on Children - UNICEF*