



LIVING AND WORKING ON THE STREET

A SURVEY OF STREET CONNECTED CHILDREN IN GULU

HASHTAG GULU
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Acknowledgments

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Foreword from the Project Coordinator

These past few months have been by far the most challenging and yet most engaging and impactful for Hashtag Gulu. I could not be prouder of the staff, volunteers and supporters who have walked with us to make this possible. Earlier this year, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic. As a result of that declaration, most countries, including Uganda, adopted drastic measures to fight the spread of the virus. This has seen us live in lockdown for two months and counting.

Naturally, our approach was to carry out sensitization to create awareness about the pandemic as well as provide one meal a day to a section of street-connected children in Gulu who were scheduled to begin a three-month hands-on skills training to prepare them for a better life in the community as productive members of society. However, it turns out that this approach would have solved only part of the problem. Fast-forward to today. We are now operating a temporary shelter and have so far provided a safe place for 70 street-connected children and young people in Gulu to sleep, and we also offer them three meals a day alongside counselling and medical treatment. Out of the 70, over 25 have enrolled in hands-on skills training, which they undergo within the shelter, two have been reunited with their families and several others have been supported in other ways. We have undertaken these measures as we think of a more long-term approach to reducing the number of children who live and work on the streets of Gulu.

Spending time at the shelter with the children, some of whom have been exploited and abused by wrong elements within our society for their selfish gain, has not only been moving but also extremely fulfilling. It has also since strengthened our resolve to continue supporting them to become better and productive members of society. Nothing brings us greater joy than seeing the smiles on their faces, a reflection of the assurance that there is a safe space for them to sleep and, best of all, not on an empty stomach.

As an organisation that started operating in a very informal way, then later transitioned into a

a community-based organisation, living in the shelter together with the street-connected children presented us with an opportunity to understand those we work with in a better way. Thus, with support and guidance from Eirene Suisse, we undertook this survey to help us do just that. We met individually with 50 young people and interacted with them in a way that we had never before, and it is the result of those interactions that we present to you in this report.

Our dream is to help create a city that is free from avoidable crime, a city that cares for its vulnerable population, especially at-risk young people who live and work on the streets. The untenable option would be to look on as a future leader, parent, doctor, artist etc. wasted away his or her life trying to make a living in the most illegal, despicable and sometimes harmful manner. We therefore dream of establishing a halfway home where willing street-connected children and young people will be cared for, rehabilitated and prepared for living the right way. Transforming our community, especially after the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency, Ebola, and now the Coronavirus crisis, is a daunting task, but it must be done. We have recorded successes in the past even though in a small way. Now, with help from partners who are willing to help us focus on our immediate locality instead of large-scale engagements, we shall be able to impact and transform more lives.

I wish to thank all our partners and well-wishers for their ongoing efforts and generosity. We have never met some of them, but they have been inspired by our work and have generously contributed to ensure that it continues. You may also be reading this simply to find out more about the dire situation of street-connected children and wondering if you can get involved in causing a change in their story. If you are one such person, I hope to hear from you soon!

Michael Ojok
Project Coordinator

1. Introduction

Street connected children can be defined as children who depend on the streets to live and/or work, either on their own or with other children/family members. They often leave a situation where they find no more hope in the future or are simply rejected to try their luck on the street, where many challenges await. Food insecurity, violence, exploitation, fears and stigmatization become their daily routine. The present report aims at shedding lights on how life on the street really is for street connected children in Gulu, Northern Uganda.

This report is structured as follow. First, the context and methodology used to collect and analyze the data are described. From a survey of 41 street connected boys and 9 girls, we start with presenting details about their profiles, including their age, for how long they have been on the street and where there are from. We then explore the reasons behind their decision to leave home, how happy they are with it and whether or not they wish to go back to their family. After briefly showing their educational background and desire to resume with some sort of education, we take a deeper look at their life on the street. On that purpose, we present data about sleeping conditions, income generating activities and food-related issues. Subsequently, we discuss their health conditions, including the major issue of harmful substances abuse. Their perceptions of different forms of violence that they feel to have been victims of at home and on the street are also presented, as well as forms of violence that they have used themselves against others. The presentation of data concludes with the most pressing needs of street connected children in Gulu and how they intend to meet these needs. Finally, this report includes recommendations based on our observations in the discussion part.

It is important to mention that while trying to offer the most objective information, we have also complemented some topics discussed in this report with our own knowledge as an organisation that works with street connected children in Gulu for many years. Through many interactions and discussions with them over the years, we developed a good understanding of their challenges and therefore integrated it when it seems relevant and appropriate.

For simplification purposes, we name all the respondents of the survey 'street connected children', although some of them are older than eighteen years old. We chose to keep the word children for two reasons. The first obvious one is that it allows avoiding long and redundant denominations while talking about the respondents of the survey, as some fall into the youth category and other are adults. Secondly, even older respondents used to be street connected children, as they grew up there and the street shaped them. Hence, they can still be considered as street connected children, or children from the street. For the same reasons, female respondents are often referred as girls, and male as boys, without considering their age. It is important to mention that we do not intend to diminish their adulthood in any ways by doing so.

It is our hope that this study will help providing useful information to different stakeholders related in a way or another to street connected children. Sharing data that we use internally to design our own interventions is important to us, as we strongly believe that raising awareness and understanding about street connected children in Gulu town is a crucial part of tackling this issue.



2. Context

The town of Gulu and more generally Northern Uganda continues to struggle with the aftermaths of a long-lasting civil war between the Ugandan government and the Lord Resistance Army's forces led by Joseph Kony. Even though the war officially ended in 2006, the massive internal displacements that forced millions away from their lands and the barbaric acts perpetrated against civilian continue to haunt the region. Many people were left with post-traumatic stress disorder among other psychological daring consequences. Broken trust will take generations before it can be restored. Moreover, the economic impact of the war was enormous and plunged many into extreme poverty. Infrastructure, markets and investment were widely destroyed, resulting in the alteration of income and skills of countless people¹.

Gulu has gone a long way since the war ended, development and reconciliation are on their way, yet it will still take long before one can say that the region has completed its recovery. The general level of poverty remains high in comparison with the entire country. According to the World Bank, in 2013 half of the people living under the poverty line in Uganda were concentrated in the North², an alarming inequality that has not improved much since. Uganda is furthermore facing massive unemployment challenges, while the population is growing fast. Despite the fall in poverty rate, many people are left behind and struggle with poverty. In that context, the most vulnerable are highly exposed to all sorts of human rights violations.

Street connected children surely belong to that category. In Gulu town only, we estimate that between 400 to 500 children and youth are living on the street. This is a rough guess considering their high degree of mobility and necessary discretion, yet it is an alarming number. Gulu's development and its central role in the region have attracted more and more street connected children in the past decade, while little has been done to reintegrate them in the society and offer them the keys to a brighter future. They face high stigmatization and fears from the local community, which has been keen to blame them for many of their problems.

Law enforcement officers are also not well trained in dealing with the specificity of street connected children. The current situation does not offer an adequate ground to improve the situation and is likely to make it worse in the future.

Hashtag Gulu strongly believes that everyone is entitled to a life where they can enjoy their rights in dignity. We have been working with street connected children for years and recently scaled up to offer them opportunities to gain skills and income sources in order to leave the street. To understand better their challenges and aspirations, we used the trust that we built with them over the years to gather more information about them. We believe that only knowledge will offer the possibility to provide adequate support and rightly raise community awareness. This is in this context and toward these objectives that we are presenting our data in this study.





3. Methodology

Data were collected through one to one interviews during a period of two weeks in Gulu with 9 girls and 41 boys. One to one interviews were preferred from focus group discussions as connected street children hardly open up unless they feel comfortable enough. The survey was developed based on one study conducted by Save the Children in India³ and adapted to the context of Northern Uganda to match with the topics that we wanted to understand better. It is composed of 41 multiple choice and open questions covering different themes. The interviewer did not read the answers of multiple-choice questions to the respondents and were asked to select the answer(s) that matched best the one of the respondents. An option to provide more details if needed was available to each relevant question.

Data were collected on electronic device with KoboCollect. For open questions, we use the axial coding method to extract the most relevant and common answers and trends. Due to the small

size of the sample, we strictly contain our observations within the frame of descriptive statistics. Correlations would indeed not be statistically significant, let aside that they would not prove any causality. Interpretation of the data presented in that study must therefore be taken and made with the appropriate caution.

It is important to note that this study is not without bias. The most obvious is the temptation of the respondents to paint a darker reality while hoping to get more support. They may also describe the situation that led them to the street worse than it was to avoid carrying the blame. In the frame of our work, we have seen self-victimization happening regularly. That being said, the answers provided by the respondents mostly match the reality that we have heard of many times and sometimes observed from our own eyes while working with street related children in Gulu. We therefore believe that this study well reflects their actual life stories.

4. Results of the Survey

4.1 Profiles of the Street Connected Children

As shown in figure 1 below, data from 50 street connected children are presented in this study. Their ages range from 12 to 25. Average age of the girls (17.3 years old) is slightly lower than the

average age of the boys (17.6 years old). Female respondents have also spent on average almost one year on the street less than the men, with respectively 5 years and 6 years.

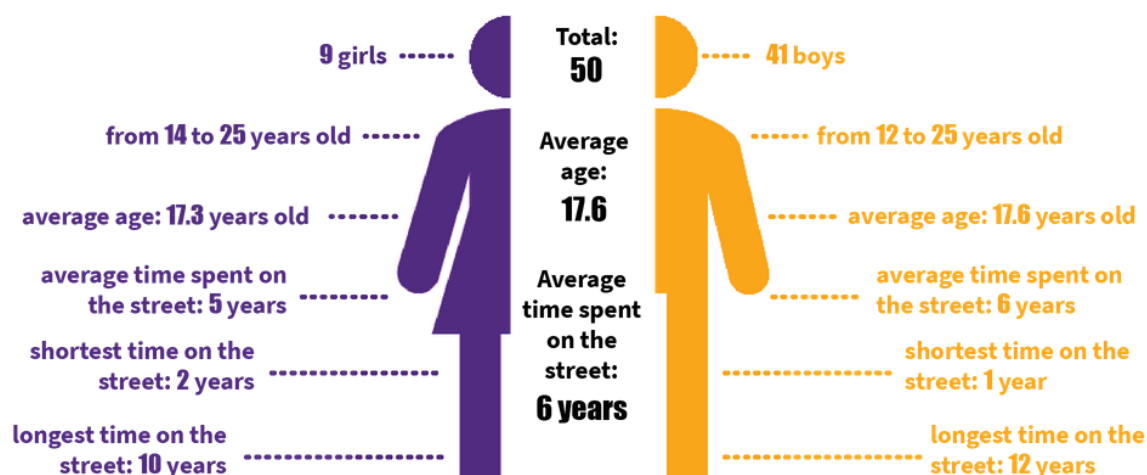


Figure 1: Age of respondents and time spent on the street

While 28 percent of the street connected children interviewed come from Gulu district, only one is originally from Gulu town. It is interesting to note that overall they are coming from eleven

different districts, as illustrated in figure 2. Kitgum district and Alebtong district account respectively for 16 and 12 percent of the respondents' origin district.

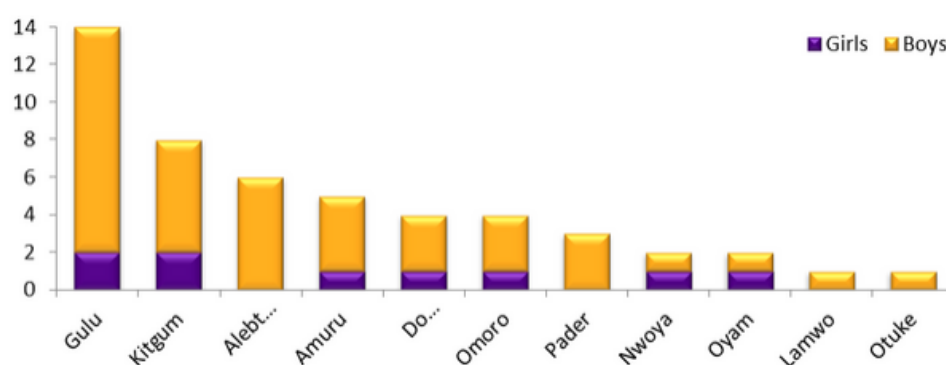


Figure 2: District of origin by gender

In terms of family members, 24% of the interviewed street connected children say that none of their parents is alive, 52% have only one parent alive while the 24% remaining still have both of

their parents. A majority of them (78%) do not have any grandparents. 29 have at least one uncle or aunt still alive.

4.2 Leaving Home for the Street

"I have never met my father in my entire life, I am the third child in a family of eight children. I first left home when I was 13 years old, but my mother found me and took me back home and the school eventually, but I never found life in school interesting so I kept on escaping and coming back to the streets until my mother gave up on me. Right now, even if we meet on the way, she can just pass me without saying a word. I think I started this street life as a result of peer pressure and desire for a good life because those days, some musicians would come to a small trading centre near our home in Karuma and they would drink alcohol, smoke marijuana and chew mairungi openly before proceeding for their concerts. That kind of life was nice to look at and I also started learning how to smoke marijuana and eventually I followed one of the musicians to Gulu from where I joined a group of many other young girls who were his dancers."

Jaqueline (16 years old)

Living on the street is rarely a choice that one would make if a better option is available. Sometimes, it is even not a choice at all. Most of the time a combination of factors leads to children leaving home to try surviving on the street. Figure 3 shows the main reasons mentioned by street connected children in Gulu to explain why they are not any more living with their family.

37 street connected children mention the desire for freedom as why they left home. Wanting to be free obviously comes from other reasons mentioned by them: free from violence and family issues (50%), free from poverty (22%), etc. More than half link their departure from home directly to violence and family wrangles, as they found themselves in a situation where they did not feel welcome at home

any more. Girls are more affected than boys when one of their parents dies, due to cultural customs. Indeed, when a girl mistakenly gets pregnant out of wedlock, most times she is not wanted at the boys home, neither is she wanted at her parents' home too especially when one parent (the influential one) is no longer alive.

The other main reason mentioned by girls is that some of their fathers wanted to force them to get married, something for which they were not ready and thus chose to leave home instead. One found herself pregnant from a street boy and was chased away. Two other boys explained that they did not feel taken care of at all, one being sick without being granted access to healthcare.

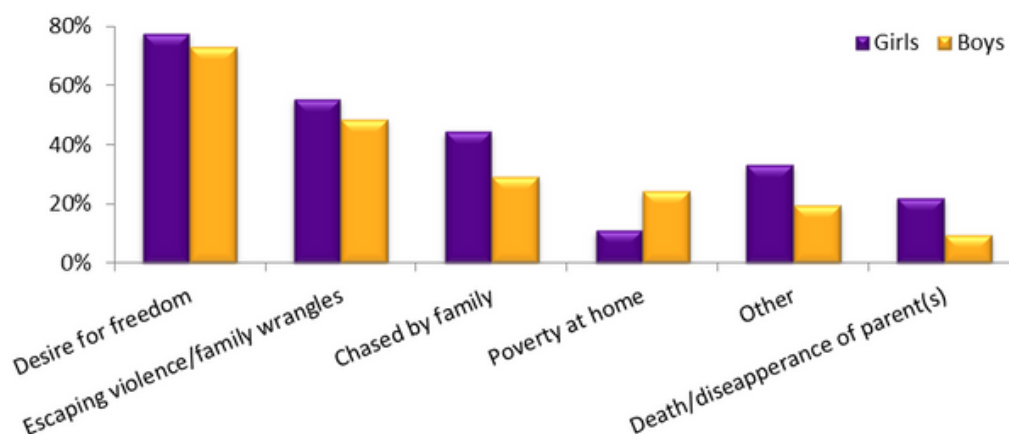


Figure 3: Reasons to leave home by gender

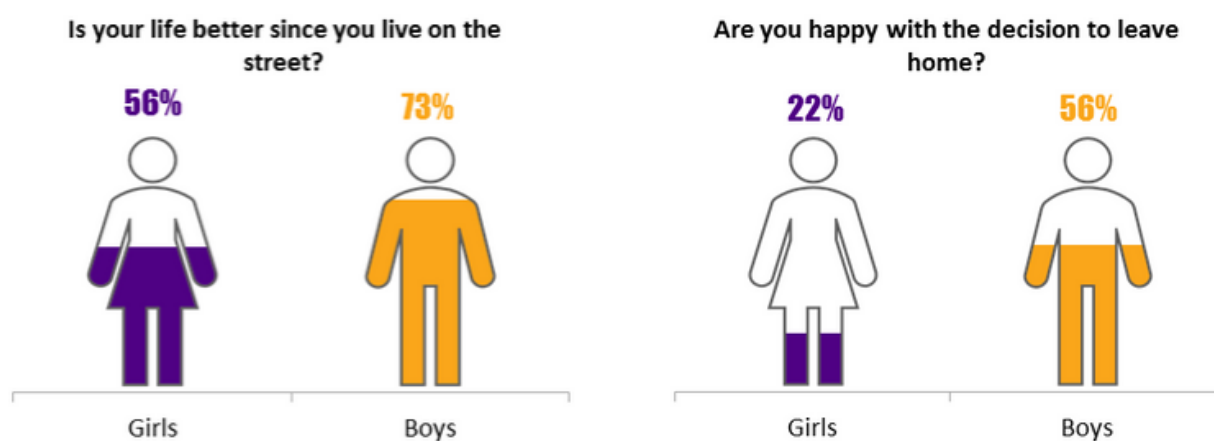


Figure 4: Satisfaction from the decision to leave home

As shown in figure 4, about half of the girls and three quarters of the boys think that their life has become better since they started to live on the street, while only 22% of the girls and 56% of the boys say that they are happy with that decision. That can be explained by the fact that they feel better off that way, but a significant part of them would have rather stayed with their family while improving their conditions. This illustrates well how desperate most of the street connected children we interviewed were with regard to their situation at home. When asked about whether or not they

would like to go back home (figure 5), 78% of the girls are either sure that they do not or they do not know. Only two of them would like to do so. Boys in general are less convinced about not going back home (46%) but more are hesitant (27%), while 11 of them mentioned that they do want to go back to their family. It is interesting yet not surprising to note that the desire to go back home decrease with age, as 50% of the respondents under 15 years old would like to do so, 30% of the ones aged between 15 and 17, and only 14% of the older ones.

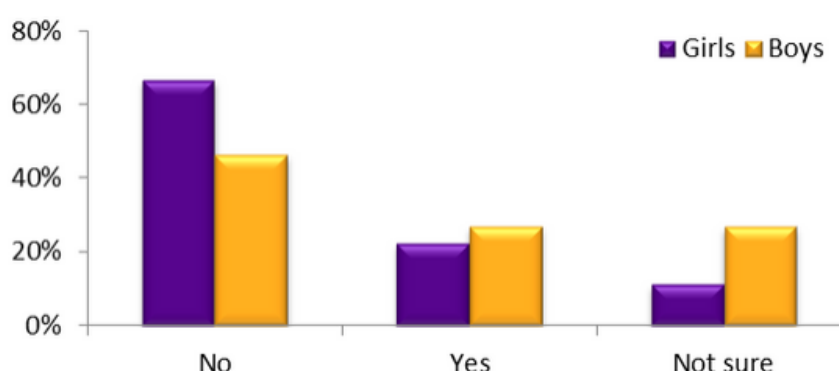


Figure 5: Desire to go back home

7 street connected children say that they would like to go back to their family because they miss them. 4 of them find that there is too much violence on the street for them to bear. One would like to go home only if someone can pay for his school fees and a pregnant girl finds too hard to be on the street

relatively to her condition. More than half (62%) of those who do not want to return mention too much problem with their family or that there is nothing for them there. 7 others say that they want to keep their independence and 2 feel not ready yet.

4.3 Education

This part is related to school and education. Every street connected child has dropped out of school and given up on education, which leads them to little work opportunity in the future. The data presented in this chapter offers a brief overview of whether or not the respondents have been to school, know how to read and write and if they would like to resume school and other type of education.

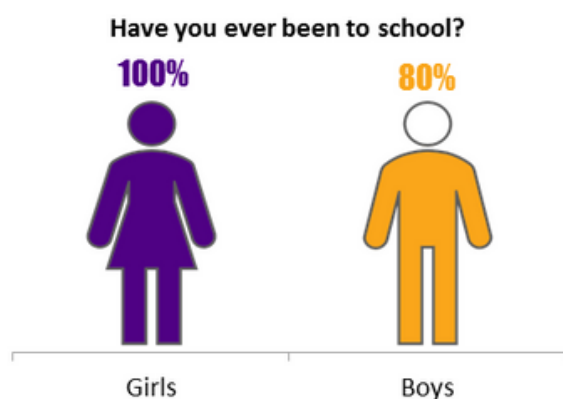


Figure 6 School

While all the girls and a majority of boys (80%) have attended school in their life, they have not reached a high level and usually dropped out before secondary level. This is partly illustrated by their literacy level, as 15 of them (30%) are not able to

read or write. This includes 4 out of 6 children under 15 years old, 5 out of 23 between 15 and 17 years old and 6 out of 20 aged 18 and above.

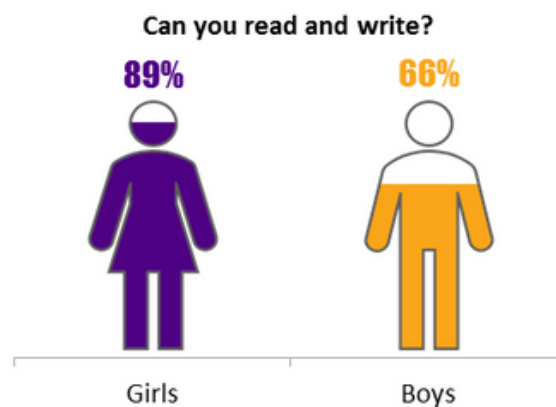


Figure 7 Reading and writing

Figure 8 shows that a majority of them would like to go back to school or be able to receive professional skills (89% of the girls and 68% of the boys). It is important to mention that most of them could not resume school where they left it. Indeed, some have dropped out from school 10 years ago and would not be able to go back to primary levels. Challenges for street connected children to pursue any kind of education are tremendous. Yet, a majority is interested in doing so.

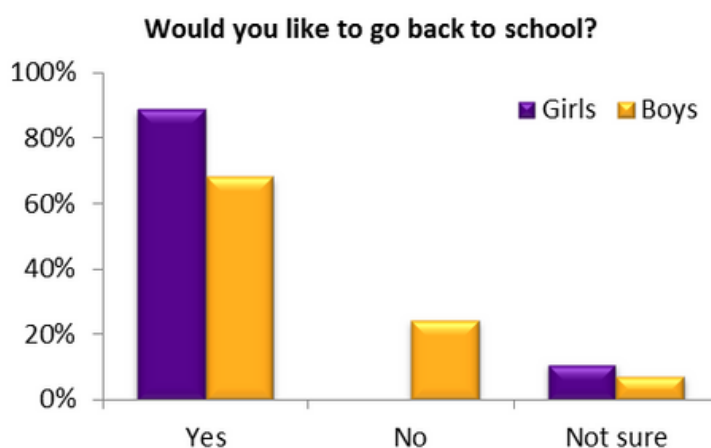


Figure 8: Desire to go back to school or pursue any kind of education

Most of the street connected children (figure 9) mention their wish to have a better life when asked why they would like to go back to school (58% in total, 88% of the girls and 50% of the boys). 19% say that they believe that they could have a better

job in the future if they were given the opportunity to learn more. It is interesting to note that 39% answer that they are interested in gaining knowledge in general, obviously to achieve both of the other objectives mentioned.

Those who do not want to resume any form of education say that they prefer trying to make money and develop their own little business instead as they have urgent needs for money, or simply that school is not for them as they are either too “dumb” for it

or cannot handle it. The respondents who are not sure about whether or not they would like to resume education mention that have other things to do or more urgently need money. One said that he has never been given the opportunity to go to school.

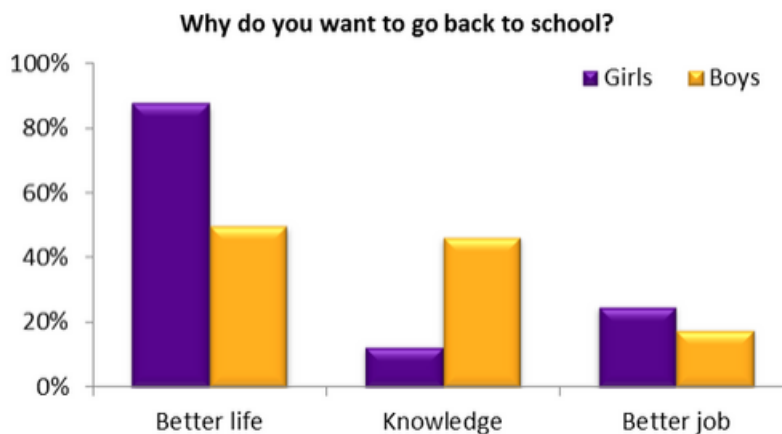


Figure 9: Main reasons to go back to school

I do not know where my father is and I was told that my mother remarried elsewhere, so at home, it was just me and my grandmother for a while, but she also passed on. I started living on the streets after she passed on because nobody cared for me like she did when she was alive. I stopped school in primary four at Aywee Primary School when I was just eight years old and I have now been on the streets for about four years. Even while I was still studying, sometimes especially during holidays I would disappear from home and I live on the streets since I felt free and did whatever I wanted on the streets. I survived on collecting and selling scraps and sometimes marijuana and when Corona broke out, life became hard because soldiers and police started raiding our hideouts and also patrolling the streets regularly so my movement became difficult at certain times of the night.

Sam (13 years old)



4.4 Life on the Street

In the chapter, we explore how street connected children are coping with their life on the street. The first section focus on sleeping-related questions, the second section on their daily occupation and finally information related to eating habits are discussed.

4.4.1 Sleeping when living on the Street

Lack of safe sleeping place is a common challenge for street connected children and is an important determinant of their vulnerability⁴. Unfinished building, on porches and directly on the street are often mentioned as the only places where they can spend the night. Mobility is relatively high, as 52% of our sample does not sleep in the same place

every night (4 girls and 22 boys). Figure 10 shows that safety concerns are the primary reason explaining it, followed by being forced to move by community members and following a group. Other answers include night activities like dealing which lead them to different places.

A majority of them sleep in a group (36 out of 50), which likely ensures better security and safety. Groups are composed on average of 6 street connected children, the smallest being 2 people and the largest reported 15 people. Those groups generally have a leader in charge and some ask for a financial contribution. Finally, 89% of the girls interviewed and 90% of the boys mention that they would like to have their own place.

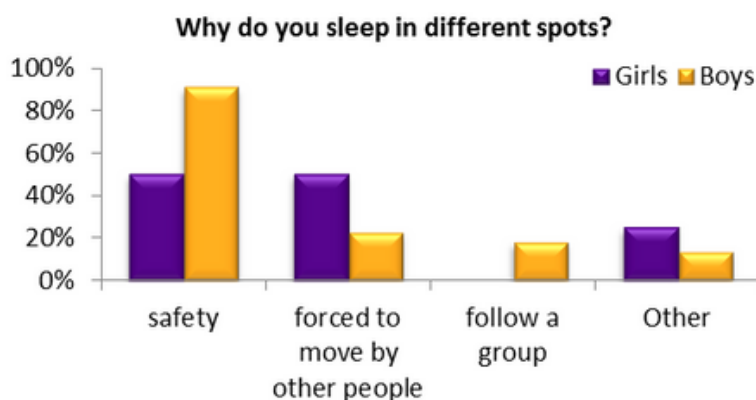


Figure 10: Reasons to sleep in different places

4.4.2 Working on the Street

Street children have basic needs that they need to cover, including food and clothing, and cannot rely on charity to do so. Therefore, they usually undertake a certain number of activities in order to generate some small income. Most of them have a combination of works and sometimes illegal activities that results in erratic daily revenue. While they can make enough to get some food and pay the leaders in the ghetto one day, they may not make any money the next day. This generates a constant state of stress and anxiety. Figure 11 shows that half of boys (49%) are collecting and selling waste

like plastic bottles and scraps as a main source of income. 42% percent of these street connected children also admit resorting to stealing and robbery (78% of the girls and 34% of the boys). It is important to note that for many of them it appears to be the only option when other ways of making money have failed. A smaller number (8 of them) mention doing some small kind of labour, like working in hotel, fetching water, brick laying or selling items at the market. 8 boys survive on selling food like mandazi and chapati. Other sources of income include prostitution for 2 girls out of 9, gambling and dealing.

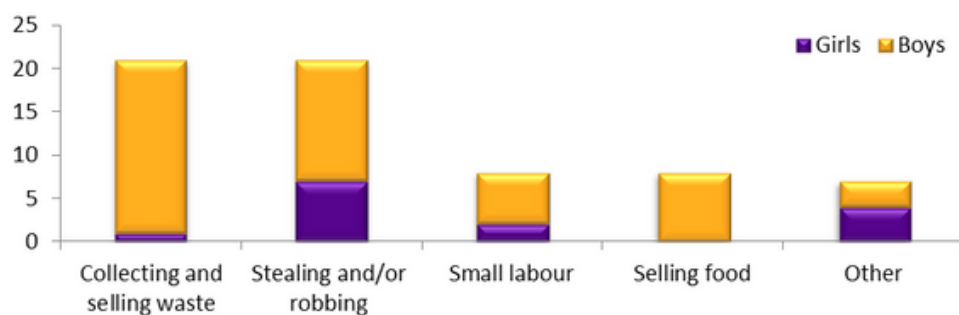


Figure 11: Type of income generating activities

Figure 12 illustrates an interesting difference between boys and girls. It seems indeed that boys tend more to work in a group and girls more alone. Overall, half of them mention to work in a group. An overwhelming majority of them (all the girls and 88% of the boys) declare feeling that their work is unsafe, either because they are exposed to violence or financially at risk of not getting anything, most often both.

On average, street connected children mentioned that they can make up to 6,900 Ugandan Shillings in a day on average; the minimum reported being 400 and the maximum 30,000. On average, girls make around 2,000 UGX less than boys. It is paramount to keep in mind that their income are

highly erratic, therefore average estimations need to be taken with caution. They can make very little to nothing during a prolonged period, which quickly put them in extremely vulnerable situations and expose them to all sort of exploitation.

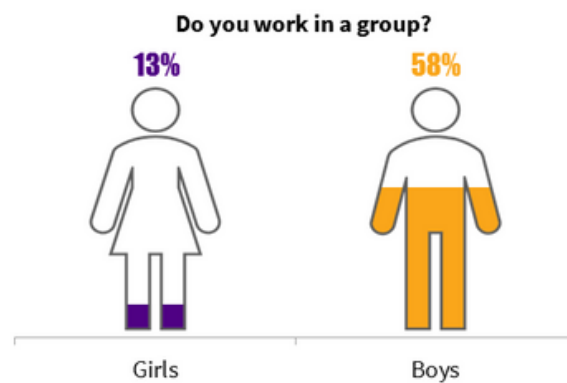


Figure 12 Work in group

4.4.3 Eating on the Street

Most of the street connected children mention eating in a hotel (80%), which includes small food stalls by the sidewalks, when they can afford it. A few others cook on their own and one still have the opportunity to eat at her mother's place. A majority of them reported being able to eat posho and beans as well as cassava, although they often just eat some kind of biscuits to cut the feeling of hunger. Figure 13 shows that most of them are not able to meet their needs in terms of food, as almost half of

them say that they feel often hungry before going to sleep, 28% report being always hungry. None of them mention never feeling hungry. As mentioned earlier, this information should be taken carefully, considering that the respondents have a strong incentive to exaggerate their answer, hoping to be provided for food. Nevertheless, the figures need to be taken seriously, as they indicate a lack of food that can/will have dire consequences. As Save the Children puts it, "sleeping with an empty stomach is the most acute form of poverty"⁵.

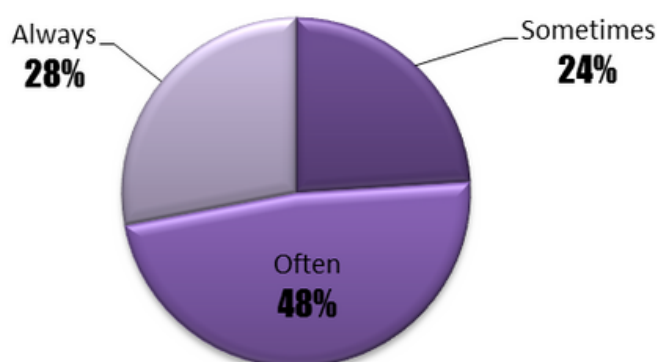


Figure 13: Frequency with which street connected children feel hungry before going to bed

In 2016, I dropped out of school when I was in Senior three studying at Lugazi High School because I couldn't keep up with paying my school fees anymore. My mother who was the only parent taking care of me and my siblings passed on in 2013 and that is when my trouble started. To be able to continue with my studies I sold rolled simsim and roasted groundnuts on the streets, but in 2016, I couldn't carry on anymore, so I dropped out of school. After that, I started selling charcoal by the roadside for a living, but that too was very difficult and you cannot make money if you don't sell in large quantity so right now I do anything to make me survive and that is how I am also able to provide for my younger siblings sometimes.

Pamela (16 years old)

4.5 Health and Harmful Substances

According to the UN Convention on the Right of the Child ratified by Uganda (art. 22) “States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health [...]”. The UN recognizes therefore the importance for every child to be in a good health. Street connected children are highly exposed to all kind of injuries and sicknesses due to their living conditions and restricted access to proper healthcare. By taking care of themselves or being looked after by other street connected children, they also have very little knowledge about health-related issues. Figure 14 shows that only 32% of the boys interviewed say that they feel in good health, and 56% of the girls. 18% of all the respondents were not sure about whether or not they feel in good health. This is obviously a subjective notion, as only experienced medical practitioners can make proper diagnose. This question was also mostly understood on the physical aspect and not the mental one, which would be even harder for them

to know. The fact that only a third of the street children consider themselves in good health is nevertheless alarming, though unfortunately not surprising.

When they feel sick, a majority (62%) go to the free clinic at the Gulu Regional Referral Hospital where they can get medication. However, there seems to be some discrimination towards them, as many reported to us that whenever they go to seek for treatment at the regional referral hospital, very little attention is given to them unless they have someone accompanying them. Also mentioned is that, the medical workers often looked at how they appear especially in terms of their dress code or how they smell which usually is not nice. Some others manage to find medicine in a small pharmacy that gives it to them at a fair price. Yet, without being properly checked by a doctor, one can hardly believe that they would be properly cured, would they suffer from specific illnesses. Three boys mentioned using marijuana as a way to heal.

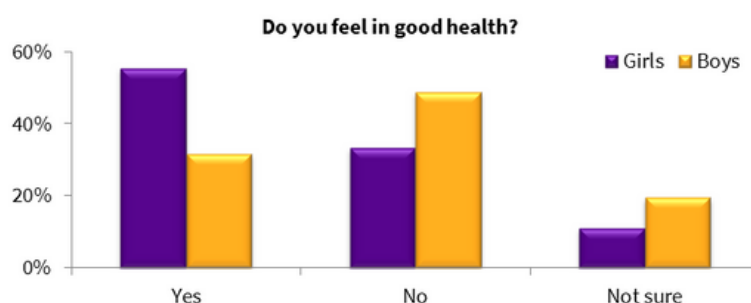


Figure 14: Health condition feeling

Another worrisome health related aspect is the quantity of harmful substances that the street connected reported to be using. For many of them consumption of substances is regular as it depends on the availability of money, yet 92% of the respondent say that they know people using harmful substances, and 84% recognize using some themselves. There is no significant difference when we look at it by gender or by age group. Using harmful substance can be seen as a coping mechanism, considering how hard life on the street can be. It is also a way to integrate a group by miming others.

Figure 15 shows the three main addictions of the street connected children, i.e. alcohol, cigarettes and marijuana. 74% of them regularly consume cigarettes and alcohol and 76% consume marijuana. Consumption of alcohol increases across age groups and the proportion of girls consuming is similar to the proportion of boys. Use of tobacco is also lower amongst children under 15 years old, however our sample shows a higher consumption of marijuana amongst the youngest group. It is worth reminding here that the size of the sample is not sufficient to generalize any conclusion in that regard.

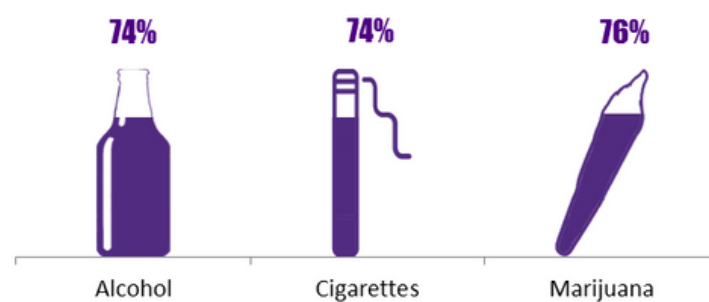


Figure 15: Main addictions reported by street connected children

Among the respondents who consume any of those products, 9 of them (21%) consume only one (either alcohol or marijuana), 14 (34%) consume two of them and 19 (46%) regularly consume all three of these substances. 4 of them also consume other types of substances such as mira (local

equivalent of khat), mairungi or whitener/glue. Even if we would need to study the question of addictions deeper to draw any medical conclusion, these figures are revealing a complex problem of use of harmful substance among street connected children in Gulu.

4.6 Violence and Abuse

Street connected children are extremely vulnerable to all forms of violence, from exploitation to sexual abuse. Moreover, violence is also often mentioned as a reason why they left home. One could say that behind each street connected child there is a story of violence, in one form or another. Considering the trauma that usually comes along, it was important to also study this question of violence. Before presenting the findings related to that topic, it is important to keep in mind that answering questions related to violence suffered from or inflicted to other can be subjective, especially because the topic in itself is quite complicated and difficult to grab. It is equally important to mention again the potential bias of victimization coming from the desire of obtaining more support from Hashtag Gulu. The following data match however fairly well our own observations over the years, therefore we believe them to be accurate and representative.

4.6.1 Violence at Home

All but 3 boys reported some sort violence at home before they went on the street, as shown in table 1 below. 100% of the girls reported being victims. The most common form of violence mention by street connected children at home is verbal violence such as insults and yelling (83%), followed by physical violence such as canning (64%), food

deprivation (53% - which can be seen as voluntary by the children while it may also come from the lack of food availability) and then sexual violence (11%). Regarding sexual violence, a third of the girls reported some form of it, while fewer boys did so.

Although slightly higher, these figures match with the overall rate of violence against children in Uganda, as beating up a child is often considered as education. According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016, 85% of children in Uganda are victim of “violent discipline”⁶. This also explains the high percentage of ‘other relatives’ as perpetrators of violence. Indeed, uncles and other distant relatives are traditionally often called to punish children, parents being sometimes considered “too soft” to choose the adequate level of violence. Other perpetrators are mostly step mothers, a problem faced mostly by girls. It is unfortunately quite common to see step mothers neglecting their step daughter in favor of their own. Overall, the level of violence reportedly faced by street connected children is extremely high and partly explains why some left home. Indeed, while it is unfortunately common in Uganda, it does not mean that everyone can take it. Some choose to leave instead.

Table 1: Violence at home reported by street connected children

	Victim of violence at home		Type of violence reported				Perpetrators				
	Yes	No	Food deprivation	Verbal	Physical	Sexual	Parents	Siblings	Other relatives	Neighbors	Other
All (N=50)	94%	6%	53%	83%	64%	11%	34%	32%	79%	23%	15%
Girls (N=9)	100%	0%	56%	100%	67%	33%	11%	33%	78%	11%	33%
Boys (N=41)	93%	7%	53%	79%	63%	5%	39%	32%	79%	26%	11%
<15 years old (N=6)	83%	17%	60%	80%	80%	0%	0%	40%	60%	0%	40%
15-17 years old (N=23)	96%	4%	50%	82%	55%	18%	46%	32%	77%	23%	9%
18+ (N=21)	95%	5%	55%	85%	70%	5%	30%	30%	85%	30%	15%



4.6.2 Violence on the Street

Streets are a hostile environment for everyone, and especially for children and young adults. Our data show that only two respondents have not felt some sort of violence was/is used against them. Most of them report being physically violated (85%) and two third feels that verbal violence is used against them (67%). 69% have already been robbed of the little they may have, with the boys reporting it more often than girls. With no surprise, the younger the

street connected children, the higher the rate of robbery. A majority of girls (75%) also report being victim of sexual violence. It is worth noting here that some of them reported seducing men hoping for money in exchange for sexual favor. When not paid, they call it sexual violence, which can arguably be the case. 40% also feels that they have been exploited. To our knowledge, there are indeed organized network banking on the vulnerability of street connected children for personal gain. Gang leaders are also keen to exploit the younger ones.

Table 2: Violence on the street reported by street connected children

	Victim of violence on the street		Type of violence reported					Perpetrators		
	Yes	No	Verbal	Physical	Sexual	Exploitation	Robbery	Street youth	Police forces	Community members
All (N=50)	96%	4%	67%	85%	19%	40%	69%	92%	67%	29%
Girls (N=9)	89%	11%	75%	75%	75%	50%	38%	88%	88%	63%
Boys (N=41)	98%	2%	65%	88%	8%	38%	75%	93%	63%	23%
<15 years old (N=6)	83%	17%	60%	60%	40%	40%	80%	100%	60%	40%
15-17 years old (N=23)	96%	4%	73%	86%	14%	36%	73%	95%	68%	18%
18+ (N=21)	100%	0%	62%	90%	19%	43%	62%	86%	67%	38%

Table 2 shows two main issues faced by street connected children, i.e. other street connected children and police forces. It seems indeed easier for street connected children to rob and perpetuate violence against other children living on the street, due to their high degree of vulnerability and the fact that they are not likely to report it to anyone. Moreover, the gang system allows for leaders to mistreat and exploit the youngest and/or most vulnerable ones. More than two third of street connected children also feel harassed and mistreated by police forces, a fact that we have abundantly observed. This is a tricky issue, considering that some of the respondents are involved into illegal activities that will likely end up with police forces confrontation. Yet police forces are not supposed to

use violence in any cases, and many children that claim not doing anything illegal also report being targeted by police forces.

Two third of the girls (63%) and 23% of the boys also mention community as perpetrators. In the past years, we have indeed noticed an increasing defiance toward street connected children in Gulu. Community members are often keen to blame people living in the street as the source of all insecurity issues in town. While some street connected children admit resorting to robbery to make a living, this is not the majority of them. Many are trying to earn a living legally and without harming anyone. Stigmatization and violence from community members certainly does not help in that regards.

4.6.3 Violence perpetrated by Street Connected Children

We have also asked street connected children if they use/have used violence themselves. It comes with no surprise that 34 out of 41 boys and 6 out of 9 girls indeed define themselves as perpetrator. Table 3 shows that physical violence is the most common form reported by the respondents (70%), likely linked with robbery, which has been done by two third of them. More than half resort to verbal violence, while 4 boys and 2 girls admitted having used sexual violence against others. Need to survive (100% of the girls and 79% of the boys) and self-defense are the most common reported reasons to

justify the use of violence, followed by pressure from peer (a third of all the respondents). Unexplained violence and pleasure come last. From our data and own observations over the years, it is obvious that street connected children in Gulu are exposed to a lot of all sort of violence from different types of perpetrators. This has dire and multiple consequences that are likely to worsen their situation and prevent even more potential reintegration in their family and the community. Physical and mental pains inflicted to street connected children will have long-lasting effects and contribute to create a very complex issue to solve.

Table 3: Violence perpetrated by street connected children

	Perpetrator of violence		Type of violence used against other				Causes				
	Yes	No	Verbal	Physical	Sexual	Robbery	Self-defense	Pressure from peer	Need to survive	Pleasure	Cannot explain
All (N=50)	80%	20%	55%	70%	15%	65%	53%	33%	83%	18%	23%
Girls (N=9)	67%	33%	83%	83%	33%	83%	33%	67%	100%	67%	17%
Boys (N=41)	83%	17%	50%	68%	12%	62%	56%	26%	79%	9%	24%
<15 years old (N=6)	67%	33%	50%	75%	0%	75%	25%	0%	75%	0%	25%
15-17 years old (N=23)	78%	22%	67%	83%	17%	56%	61%	56%	83%	11%	11%
18+ (N=21)	86%	14%	44%	56%	17%	72%	50%	17%	83%	28%	33%

One day I was very hungry and I went to a friend's home and ate from there thereafter I stayed for two days before returning to our home. When I returned home, my elder brothers told me to go back to where I was for the past two days. They pointed for me the road and told me to go, that is how I left home and started living on the streets. At first, I walked up to Lacor and lived in the centre for about a month, then I proceeded to Gulu town. To survive, I fetch water for people, I also collect scraps and plastic bottles and I later sell it to people who deal in them. By doing this, I can survive since I can always have some money on me to buy food and anything else to eat. Whenever I don't feel well, I just look for marijuana and once I smoke it, I immediately feel better. I used to take these other medicines such as Panadol etc, but I don't think they work on me anymore.

Mark (12 years old)



4.7 Needs and Aspirations

Finally, we asked the street connected children in an open question what their most pressing needs are, and how they intend to meet them. Figure 16 shows that all but two boys mentioned food as their most urgent needs. All the children under 15 years old mentioned it. 34 street connected children listed money in their immediate needs, which seem obvious as without money they can hardly meet

their other needs. Yet, many mentioned money because they need some for what they are asked to pay by their ghetto leaders. 56% listed shelter, 44% clothing and a third mentioned medication (29% of the boys and 56% of the girls). Three said that they need a (better) job and/or a capital to start a business and one mentioned his family.

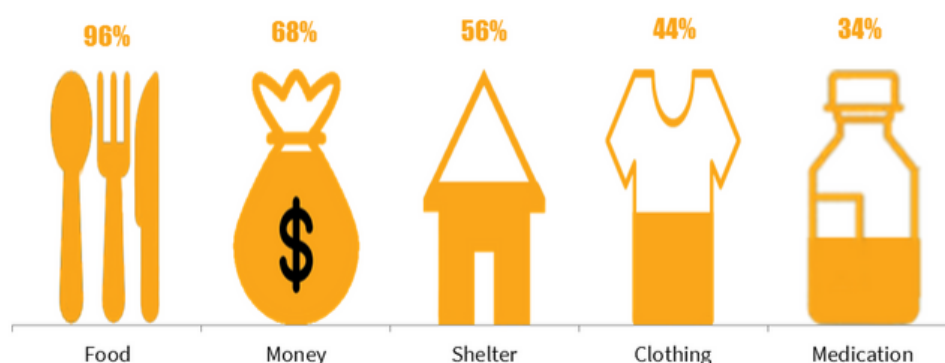


Figure 16: Most pressing needs of street connected children

When asked about how they intend to meet their needs, a majority (60%) of street connected children said that they will work harder. 11 (2 girls and 9 boys) mentioned that they will need to steal and rob more. In that regards, a common perspective is what we often hear from them: “I am theft, I do not know how to do something else, and so I will steal more”. 8 of them mention struggling harder in general as a

way to cope with their situation. The category ‘other’ in figure 17 includes answers like street connected children saying that they do not know how they will reach their needs, need to be supported or will beg. One mentioned that he needs knowledge, while another “want to focus on being a better person”.



Figure 17: How street connect children intend to meet their needs

5. Discussion and Recommendations

This study shows the whole complexity of the situation of street connected children in Gulu. Violence, substance abuse, insecurity, fear and hunger are constantly present. Yet most of them keep hoping for a better future where they can have enough food and a place of their own, as well as steady source of income that allows for taking care of their basic needs. This complex situation requires a holistic approach that takes in consideration as many aspects as possible to tackle the issues faced by street connected children.

5.1 Program recommendations

Many says that they wish to have access to a form of education or another, so that they can have a better job (or simply a job) and a better life. Most of them dropped out of school long time ago and cannot simply resume where they left. For this reason, it is important to offer them tailored schooling, vocational training and life skills that fit with their needs, desires and capacities so that they can find their way out of poverty on the street by access to sustainable income. It is equally important to take in consideration the age of the street connected children, as education and work opportunities highly vary across age groups. Any program designed to support them should therefore be designed to accommodate their needs based on their age, how long they have been on the street and whether or not it is possible for them to reintegrate back home. The fact that a third cannot read and write also needs to be tackled through literacy classes in one way or another.

On that regard, reuniting street connected children, especially the youngest, with their family must be a priority when possible. This requires a lot of counseling with key family members too, as putting back these children in a toxic environment must be avoided, considering that it is often the reason why they left home in the first place. This should also be done only when street connected children express the desire to go back home and when the family is willing to accept them back, otherwise it is likely to cause more troubles. Overall, action with the

youngest children living on the street should be undertaken as soon as possible, considering that the longer they stay on the street, the harder it becomes to reintegrate into a safe and secure environment and resume education.

This study also highlights the important issues of addictions and potential trauma from all the violence these streets connected children are exposed to. Professional psychological support and counseling is therefore paramount for a successful reintegration. Traumatized street connected children are usually a very difficult group of vulnerable people to work with, as they have little to no trust in other people to help them. Such support should also be provided on a voluntary basis and not be imposed; it will likely not work otherwise. Yet, without tackling these issues of addiction and trauma, it will be very difficult if not impossible to offer them a way out of the street.

A majority of them also mentioned not feeling in good health. Therefore, free and safe access to healthcare should also be provided, as well as access to knowledge on good health practices. Hashtag Gulu partnered with medical clinics in Gulu in the past and we hope to continue being able to find partners willing to provide adequate healthcare to street connected children in the future. The question of food is also important, considering that many of them feel often hungry and are undernourished, which can have severe consequences. Providing them with healthy meals seems adequate, yet we should avoid to fall into the trap of create dependencies and attracting more children in the street. Therefore, food distribution should be included into a broader support aiming at giving them the necessary tools to be out of the street.

Another major issue impeding the reintegration of street connected children in Gulu is their quasi constant tension with law enforcement agencies and stigmatisation from community members. Initiating dialogue with members of law enforcement agencies to raise awareness on street connected children's issues seems therefore very important, as training them on how to handle these issues. It is also equally important to engage the community

through community dialogues and awareness campaign. We believe that the most important message is making people understand that most of the street connected children have no desire to stay on the streets. The more people are involved in creating a more favorable environment for them, the more chances they have to successfully reintegrate back into the society. Hostility toward them, whether coming from law enforcement officers or community members, is likely to make it worse.

Hashtag Gulu also strongly believes that working upstream is paramount to avoid the issue of street connected children worsening in the future. This includes sensitization campaign in schools to reduce dropout rate, but should also include school fees support program when a family is not able to pay for them. Girls are also usually seen as less valuable and when facing financial constraints, they are more likely to be the first to be deprived of education. That issue involves broader discussion on the place of girls in our society.

Finally, it is worth exploring the option of providing temporary housing or a halfway home in the near future. As it is now, it is very challenging to offer any tangible or long-term life changing support as long as the children/young people are still connected to the streets. The advantage a halfway home provides is one that assures the street connected child of a safe place to sleep, decent meals as well as other needs being met and all he or she has to do is concentrate on getting better and ready for life in the community as a changed person.

5.2 Monitoring and research recommendations

The present study covers many topics, however not as deep as it probably should. The issues of addiction and violence, among others, definitely deserve more attention. At Hashtag Gulu, we strongly believe that acquiring a maximum of knowledge is the best way to provide adequate and relevant support to street connected children. We will continue to gather data in Gulu, yet we are also limited by our own knowledge in very specific areas. We therefore intend to partner with other

specialized organisations when possible to deepen our understanding of certain precise aspects of street connected children.

In the same vein, we will also continue to gather data from more children living on the street in Gulu to obtain more significant information. This study includes 50 of them, yet many more are connected to the street. We also hope to partner with other interested organisations working with street connected children in the area of Gulu in the future in that regard. This will help to deepen our understanding of the dynamics on the street and designing the best approach to tackle this major issue.

Finally, monitoring what is happening on the street is also very important in order to be aware as much as possible of the situation and provide adequate support. Street connected children are very mobile and often come and go, with newcomers regularly making their first steps on the street. An efficient monitoring system would allow knowing how many are on the street, where they come from and how old they are, among other paramount information. Such system would be relatively challenging to develop, yet we believe that the trust developed over the years between street connected children and Hashtag Gulu could offer interesting opportunities in that regard.



6. Conclusion

Data from 41 street connected boys and 9 girls in Gulu show that they are coming to Gulu town from many different districts hoping for a better future, as they feel that staying home is hopeless for them. They abandon family and school to go and live on the street and try to survive by doing all sort of odd jobs, from collecting and selling waste to small labour in hotel and markets. They sometimes fall into petty crimes like stealing and robbing when they do not find another way to sustain their own needs. Violence is also omnipresent in the life of street connected children, whether at home before going to live on the street or once they reach it. That makes them highly vulnerable to any form of exploitation and stigmatization, which reinforce their attachment to the street and drive them further away from reintegration.

However, most of these children have strong desire for a better future. They wish to have a safe place to stay, not worry everyday about how they can put food in their stomach and being victims of violence, having a stable job and the possibility to learn and become better people. In Northern Uganda, many people are already facing poverty and unemployment. In these conditions, it becomes hard for anyone to find their way through life and provide for themselves and those they care for. Street connected children are not an exception; actually, quite the opposite. They bear the burden

of rejection from their family and community to find only violence and the most challenging living conditions on the street. Too often, they start abusing harmful substances in a way to cope with their reality.

Life on the street is no life for children. Their aspirations and dreams for the future are taken away from them. Once they grow up on the street, it is extremely difficult to go back to a normal life, let alone animosity and stigmatisation from community members and authorities. They need to unlearn survival mechanisms acquired on the street to find how to fit within a society led by rules and regulations. Most of all, they need to learn how to trust again.


At Hashtag Gulu, we aim at accompanying and supporting these streets connected children toward successful reintegration. We strongly believe that offering skills to them, training and counseling are the best way for them to reach independence and a more stable life far from the street. We are fully aware of the complexity of our objectives, which is why we intend to gather a maximum of data about street connected children in Gulu. This report shows the first series and more will come. We hope that it will enlighten stakeholders and other interested individual on the reality of street connected children in Gulu, so that we can all work together help them to find their own way.







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