Street Children in Kolkata: An Analytical Study of Their Living Conditions and Demographic Characteristics in Selected Municipal Wards

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Abstract

Street children are one of the most excluded and vulnerable people in those very fast developing cities such as Kolkata. The current study presents analytical review of 110 street children in terms of livelihoods and demographic status trends of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation in its chosen wards. By use of concerted field observations and casual interactions, the study manages to obtain vital statistics in the areas of age distribution, economic participation, night-time accommodation, and availability of primary services, with no need to use formal sampling or surveys. The results indicate the population of children of age between 11-14, high rate of rag-picking and begging activities to earn livelihood and significant lack of shelter and other amenities. Very few children access clean water, sanitation, education and healthcare and most even sleep on pavements or railway platforms. The research identifies the structural weaknesses in the lives of these children and makes a case to integrate and community-based policy interventions to respond to shelter, child protection, inclusive services, and preventive urban planning.

Keywords: Street Children, Urban Poverty, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Informal Economy, Shelter Insecurity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The urban children on the street are amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalized section of the country and their condition is worst in emerging economies such as India. These children in most cases are not given any fundamental rights to shelter, education, healthcare and protection, and stable family life. These problems intersect in a complex way to influence their lives as a result of poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, abandonment, forced migrations and non-access to the mainstream support systems within institutions. Due to the galloping rate of urbanization, the economic gap that is steadily widening, the breakup of the family, high migration of rural people to the urban areas in India, a rising number of children live, work, or grow up in the streets, without adult supervision or the care and custody of legal care providers.

Kolkata being one of the oldest and densely populated metropolitan cities of India has had a visible but neglected population of the street children long before it realized. These children live at hazardous circumstances, sometimes they sleep on the pavements, rail platforms, or flyovers or illegitimate shelters and they have little access of food, water, sanitation, or education. A large number of them take part in economically risky or predatory enterprises like rag-picking, selling items, begging or offending as an assistant in a road eatery.

This paper will present a hermeneutically based and a locally oriented analytical evaluation of the demographic profile and the conditions of living of the street children of the selected areas in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The study implements a non-survey method of research based on systematic field observations and informal, trust-based interaction with children in their home settings as opposed to relying on the conventional survey tools that fail to capture the actual living experience of the highly mobile and undocumented populations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bag et al. (2019) conducted comparative research to see the living situation in India in slums on three main cities in India. Their study depicted the representations in terms of slums as complex, informal settlements that have poor infrastructure, congestion and absence of basic amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation, education and healthcare facilities. The authors did not only note that such living conditions reproduced poverty, but also caused serious health and safety risks to children and adolescents, who are most frequently forced to

economically participate in the form of unregulated and informal labour.

Banerjee and Malik (2019) highlighted an exploration about the quality of life in the slums of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). They have found astonishing intra-city inequality and have indicated the significance of geography, the availability of infrastructure, and socio-political marginalization as the determinants of life outcomes. In spite of having welfare programs or urban development plans, their analysis showed that in practice, there was incidence of service delivery which very seldom acknowledged the real causes of deprivation to the slum dwellers.

Basu et al. (2021) focused on the matter using a public health perspective; it focused on the sociodemographic and psychosocial correlates of substance abuse among street children in Kolkata. Their survey of cross-section revealed that a considerable number of the street children had already started consuming the substances in an endeavour to cope with the trauma or neglect along with peer influence. It has been established that age, length of stay in the streets and a lack of family support are essential risk factors; it is therefore important to streamline mental health services, addiction counselling and a system of rehabilitation.

Bera et al. (2020) provided in-depth description of the economic conditions of the street children living in six selected wards of Kolkata. They discovered that most children were occupied in economic activities that are more survival-based such as rag-picking, selling in the street, and doing menial jobs. It was noted in the study that there were some common denominators in this population; economic instability, family breakages, and lack of adult guardians. In addition, the authors mentioned that most of these children were school dropouts or had never received any form of education at all and this further contributed to their marginalization socio-economically.

3.   METHODOLOGY

The present study engages in descriptive and interpretative Quantitative approach to investigate and compile the findings of living conditions, means of survival and demographic traits of 110 street children in a chosen group of wards covering central and north Kolkata. The emphasis is on the conditions that one can observe in reality but not the self-reported condition that can be biased and incomplete among vulnerable populations like street children. The Quantitative method enables one to have a wholesome perception of the lives experienced by the children keeping within their autonomy and research ethics.

3.1   Research Design

The design of the study is non-experimental and explorative with special consideration of in-field observation, data collection with emphasis on Quantitative rather than numerical interpretation of data.

The study was conducted in six municipal wards to be selected in central and northern Kolkata city on the basis of:

- Large exposure to the street child populations
- Access to transport infrastructure (railroad stations, large avenues)
- Existence of NGOs that deal with vulnerable kids

3.2   Sampling Technique

To choose the participants a non-random, purposive sampling technique was used. The sample was comprised of 110 street children, who were identified and followed after several visits in the field. The children were selected on the following basis:

- Access in the public places (streets, railway stations, around temples etc.).
- Alleged Fore-Background information: Collaboration with local NGOs
- Stability of presence with no exclusion of the temporary or single appearances.

4.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this section are in form of direct field observation and informal interaction with 110 street children in the selected wards of Kolkata Municipal Corporation. This information is otherwise thematically grouped and presented in forms of tables and figures to give a better impression of some of the areas in their lives such as age distribution, their economic activities,

sleeping conditions, and availability of basic services. These graphical tools stress the trends and new tendencies obtained in the field and provide essential overview of the issues of this vulnerable group.

4.1 Age Composition of Street Children

The definition of street children age distribution is important as determining the stages of vulnerability. The present section provides tabular as well as graphical presentation of age-wise information obtained by surveying 110 children dwelling in the streets in some of the wards of Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

Table 1 gives the frequency and % age distribution of the perceived street children since 5 age groups include Below 6 years, 6-10 years, 11-14 years, 15-17 years, and 18 years and above. This tabular display can assist in measuring the demographic structure and the representation of age groups that are most numerical within sample.

Table 1: Age-Wise Distribution

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	% age (%)
Below 6	12	10.9
6 – 10	27	24.5
11 – 14	38	34.5
15 – 17	21	19.1
18 and above	12	10.9
Total	**110**	**100.0**

The biggest segment is the 11 14 years age category with 34.5 % of the total number of street children as the table indicates. This is the stage of early adolescence that is commonly characterized with schooling and psychological growth but rather with living on the streets. Children between the age 6-10 have also a higher proportion (24.5 %), and those between 15-17 (19.1 %). The 18 and above as well as the Below 6 years form 10. 9 % each.

Figure 1 presents a graphical Figure in form of % age in distribution of the street children in similar five age categories as illustrated in Table 1. This graphic material makes it easier to comprehend as it shows age variation in the population clearly.
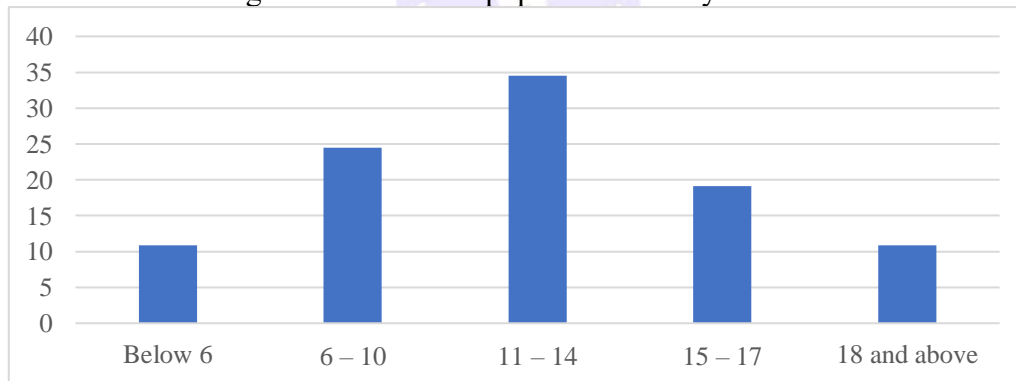

Figure 1: Graphical Representation of the % age of Age-Wise Distribution

The Figure graphically proves the results in Table 1, meaning the large number of children in the age category of 11-14 years. The comparative analysis makes the chart also intuitively more readable as well, with the sharp upward curve of the Below 6 group to 11-14 years, and an equal but slowly descending curve towards the older brackets. The visual tendency reveals a strong necessity of intervention in the period of early adolescence when the risk of street involvement seems to be the strongest.

4.2 Nature of Engagement and Economic Activity

The street children are mainly concerned with winning an economic survival especially those involved in informal labour or risky labour. This part examines the various types of economic activities that the study children engaged in so that the nature and scope of their work activity could be established. The occupational profile of 110 street children spotted in the wards identified in Kolkata Municipal Corporation may be reflected as demonstrated in the following

table and figure.

The table of 2 describes the list of the major occupations or daily activities of the street children. It classifies their economic activities either as rag-picking, street vending or assisting vendors, begging, time in eateries/tea stalls or idle / unemployed. It is this breakdown that enables us to appreciate the methodologies through which these children have adapted to cope within their society and get exposed to the informal labour market.

Table 2: Primary Occupation or Activity

Activity Type	Frequency	% age (%)
Rag-picking	33	30.0
Street vending/helping vendors	19	17.3
Begging	28	25.5
Working in eateries/tea stalls	16	14.5
Idle/unemployed	14	12.7
Total	**110**	**100.0**

The activity that is most common among the children is rag-picking which features in 30 per cent of the sample. Begging (25.5%) and street vending /helping vendors (17.3%) follow them and take a large proportion as well. They are usually underpaid, unregulated and tend to put the children at risk of being physically abused and used. It is interesting to note that 14.5 % of the children work in small restaurants or even tea stalls where the child labour laws are mostly flouted. Also, 12.7 % of the children are idle or unemployed, that is, they do not engage in any economic or institutional system, they end up contributing to their exposure to the criminal or exploitative conditions.

Figure 2 is a Figure which has visual illustration of the Primary occupational activities as % age of the children. It assists in instant comparison of the occurrence of different engagements among street children.
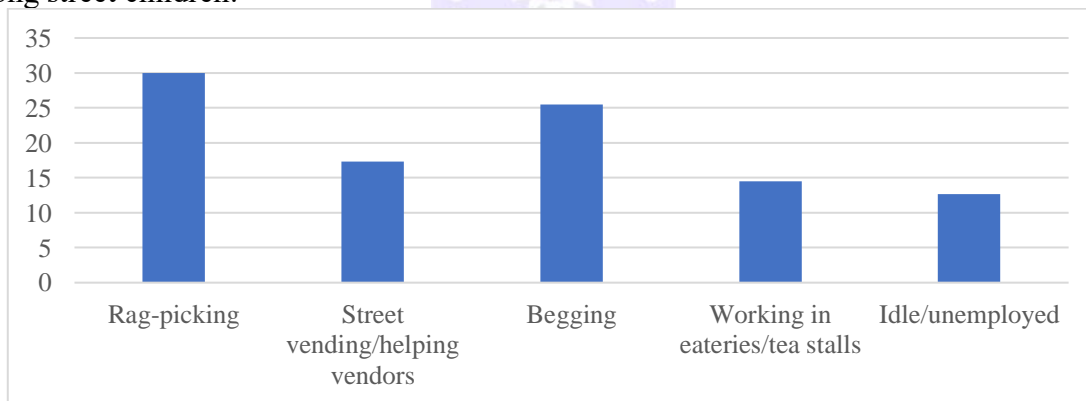

Figure 2: Graphical Representation of the % age of Primary Occupation or Activity

The bar graph supports the table information since one can get the visual impact exerted in favour of rag-picking and begging as the major survival practices. The steep bars of these categories indicate how frequent these are and the lower bars of working in eateries and unemployed categories indicate the absence of alternatives as to safer and structured works.

4.3 Night-Time Living Arrangements

The table describes the type of sleeping arrangement of 110 street children at night found at selected wards of Kolkata. They have divided their typical sleeping places into five major categories, which are pavements/ roadsides, railway platforms, religious places (temples or gurudwaras), NGO-operated night shelters and open and /or vacant buildings/ spaces [under the flyover]. Each category is followed by the frequency and the % age of the children who use that sleeping arrangement.

Table 3: Night-Time Sleeping Arrangement

Sleeping Location	Frequency	% age (%)
Pavement/Roadside	41	37.3
Railway Station/Platform	22	20.0

Near Temples/Gurudwaras	17	15.5
NGO-run shelter at night	15	13.6
Vacant buildings/under flyovers	15	13.6
Total	**110**	**100.0**

It is seen in the table that the most popular night time setup of the street children takes the form of pavement or roadside sleeping, because 37.3 % of the sample are pavement or roadside sleepers. This is next to railway stations or platforms that stand at 20 % in which kids can find some cover or activity during the night. Many children also sleep around temples or gurudwaras (15.5%), probably because of availabilities of food or free spaces. Notably, mere 13.6 % inhabits night shelters available during the day at NGOs, which gives the impression of its inadequacy or unavailability. Some 13.6 % also live in empty buildings or under flyovers, which suggests a more favourable condition but they still do not feel secure and clean in these places.

The Figure below (Figure 3) gives a representation of the data given in Table 3 as shown. It presents a % age frequency of distribution of 110 street children on their main places of sleeping at night.
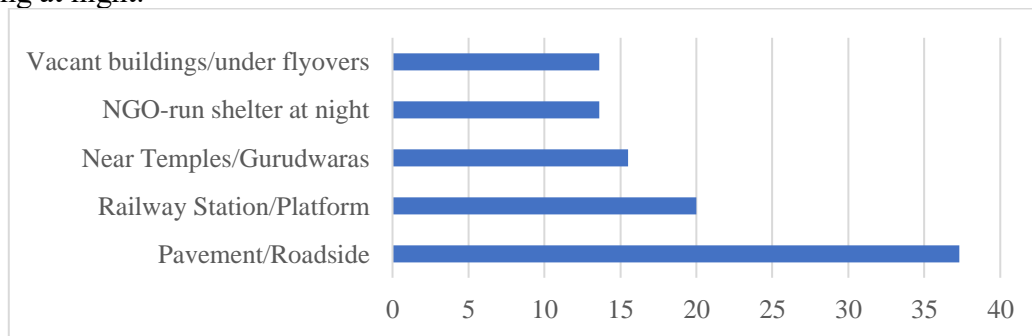

Figure 3: Graphical Representation of the % age of Night-Time Sleeping Arrangement

Visually, the Figure proves that the most frequent type of shelters used by street children during the night is the pavements/roadsides with the most prominent bar and equal to 37.3%. It also shows clearly that the notable alternatives are railway platforms (20%) and temples/gurudwaras (15.5 %).

The bars of the NGOs-run shelters and the empty buildings and flyovers are shorter and are the same (that of 13.6%). Such comparative perspective points at the extreme disproportion between life in the informal exposed settings and institutional care.

4.4 Availability of Basic Services

This table shows information on the accessibility of street children (n=110) to fundamental basic services in some randomly chosen municipal wards of Kolkata. The table shows the frequency of children (how many can access which service) as well as the % age with regard to the total population.

Table 4: Access to Basic Services

Service Category	Frequency (Yes)	% age (%)
Access to public toilets	46	41.8
Access to clean drinking water	50	45.4
Attending any form of school	9	8.18
Receiving regular health checkups	5	4.5

The table portrays the fact that fewer children in the street (45.4] have access to clean drinking water and access to public toilets (41.8) child are left highly-underserved in terms of basic hygiene and sanitation facilities. The situation is even more serious as far as education and healthcare are concerned only 8.18 % of the children receive Refereed education in any kind of school, and only 4.5 % of the kids receive the regular medical check-ups.

The Figure below (Figure 4) is a horizontal Figure that gives the visual picture on the % age of children who have gained access to each of the four basic services. This visual image supports

the data contained in a table since users can compare the results of research in the various categories of service accessibility intuitively and quickly.
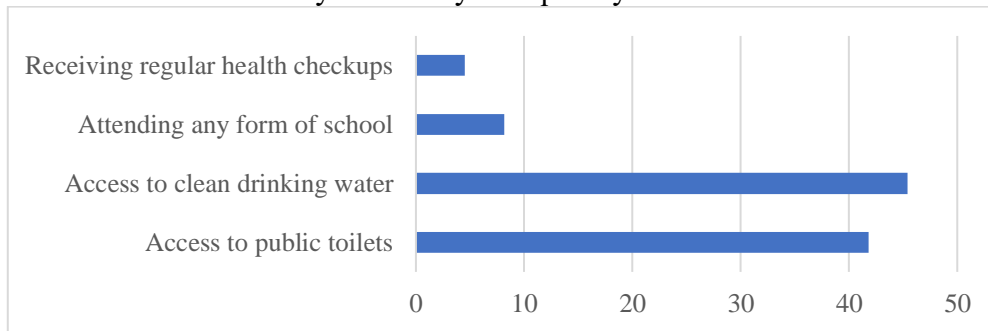

Figure 4: Graphical Representation of the % age of Access to Basic Services

The Figure distinctly shows the inequality in access to services. Clean drinking water and public toilets have the highest % ages compared to the other four services, but still lies below 50 per cent and means inadequate coverage of infrastructure. The greatly reduced bars of school attendance and health checkups graphically highlight the fact that these children are underprivileged in the fields of education and health.

5.   CONCLUSION

This paper was set to get a glimpse of the daily lives of street children in the city of Kolkata through looking at the distribution of demographic profile and living conditions of street children in six strategically critiqued municipal wards. Informal interaction and grounded fieldwork showed that they harbor deep rooted vulnerabilities that define their lives with a considerable focus on the 11-14 age group with overall dependence on rag-pickers and beggars as their chief means of survival. A majority of the children live in unsafe open areas (in pavements and railway platforms) and have limited access to clean water, sanitation, education and healthcare among others which they face a severe restriction. Such circumstances reveal a structural breakdown to assimilate street children within the scheme of urban assistance, in which the current NGO and welfare services prove insufficient.

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