
Original Research

Substance abuse among street children of Jammu region.

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Abstract:

Background: Street children have a greater burden than other poor children who are supervised by adults. The inherent dangers of being in the street situation, economic deprivation and lack of adult protection and inadequate socialization etc., make them extremely vulnerable. Many street children are involved in harmful use of psychoactive substances which can lead to increase the chance of accidents, violence, unwanted pregnancy and unprotected sex. The sad part is that there is paucity of reliable data on street children in Jammu and Kashmir.

Material and Methods:

80 street children were chosen after mapping potential sites in urban Jammu using purposive and snowball sampling and were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire.

Results:

Majority of the children studied were “children on the street” with a higher proportion of females representing the sample. The mean age of boys and girls was 12.18 (2.62) and 11.35(2.28) years, respectively. A wide variety of the substances were reportedly abused by nearly half of the children studied (46.25%). A very high proportion of males reported substance abuse as compared to females (84.8% versus 15.2 % respectively). Cigarettes and Pan Masala were chief substances abused by the children studied (10% each).

Conclusion:

The phenomenon of drug abuse is rampant among street children. Easy availability of these substances is one of the reasons reported which needs to be looked into while devising policies for street children.

Introduction:

The conditions in which many children live today are becoming worse and increasing phenomenon of “*street children*”, which sometimes has catastrophic manifestations is an apt example to demonstrate this. The term “*street child*,” was developed in the 1980s to describe “any girl or boy for whom the street has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults.”¹ UNICEF² suggests that tens of millions of children live or work on streets worldwide with that the number constantly growing. India with a population of more than 1 billion has the largest population of these street and working children in the world.³ Street children have a greater burden than other poor children who are supervised by adults. The inherent dangers of being in the street situation, economic deprivation and lack of adult protection and inadequate socialization etc., make them extremely vulnerable. Many street children are involved in harmful use of psychoactive substances which can lead to increase the chance of accidents, violence, unwanted pregnancy and unprotected sex. The sad part is that there is paucity of reliable data on street children in Jammu and

Kashmir. Therefore this study was conducted to explore the phenomenon of substance abuse among street children.

Material and Methods:

After taking the approval of Institutional Ethics Committee, this study was conducted on street children in urban Jammu for a period of 1 year extending from November 2012 to October 2013. The following children were considered eligible to participate:

- (a) Aged 7–18 years; male or female and
- (b) Inhabiting streets or spending long hours on street or
- (c) Hired by any agency or working for themselves or
- (d) Found begging.

The selection of eligible participants was done using purposive and snowball sampling. An initial mapping was done to identify potential sites for street children in urban Jammu. All the children identified in these sites were listed at the initial visit. Verbal consent was obtained from all the children before interviewing them. Wherever possible consent

of the parents/guardian was also solicited. An appropriate place for the conduct of interview was then located on mutually convenient basis and the interview was conducted using the semi-structured proforma. The investigator offered incentives to some children so as to compensate their loss in earnings. Some street children, however, refused to oblige and were excluded from the study.

Statistical Analysis:

The data was expressed in percentage and was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results:

Table 1 depicts that majority of the children studied were “children on the street” with a higher proportion of females

representing the sample. The mean age of boys and girls was 12.18 (2.62) and 11.35 (2.28) years, respectively. As far as the educational status is concerned, nearly 4/5th of the children studied were presently out of schools. Almost half of the children (47.5%) were involved in begging activities with females outnumbering males. Table 2 shows that a wide variety of the substances were reportedly abused by nearly half of the children studied (46.25%). A very high proportion of males reported substance abuse as compared to females (84.8% versus 15.2 % respectively). Cigarettes and Pan Masala were chief substances abused by the children studied (10% each).

Table no 1: Socio demographic characteristics of street children:

Socio demographic characteristics	Male	Female	Total
Category of child			
a Children on the street	35 (45.45 %)	42 (54.55%)	77 (96.2%)
b. Children of the street	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.8%)
Age in years			
7 to ≤10	12 (52.2%)	11 (47.8%)	23 (28.7%)
>10 to ≤14	19 (40.4%)	28 (59.6%)	47 (58.7%)
>14 to ≤18	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	10 (12.6%)
Educational status			
Enrolled	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	15 (18.7%)
Never enrolled	8 (27.6%)	21 (72.4%)	29 (36.3%)
Drop out	21 (58.3%)	15 (41.7%)	36 (45%)
Work activities			
Begging	12 (31.5%)	26 (68.5%)	38 (47.5%)
Scavenging	16 (61.5%)	10 (38.5%)	26 (32.5%)
Others*	10 (62.5%)	6 (37.5%)	16 (20%)

* Includes car cleaners, shoe cleaners, vendors, and tea stall worker.

Table no. 2: Distribution of substance Abuse among Street children:

Substances abused	Male (n=38)	Female (n=42)
Alcohol only	6 (100%)	0 (0%)
Cigarettes/bidhis only	8 (100%)	0 (0%)
Alcohol & Cigarettes	3 (100%)	0 (0%)
Guthka/Panmasala	2 (25%)	6 (75%)
Charas/Ganja	3 (100%)	0 (0%)
Thinner/glue	3 (100%)	0 (0%)
Fluid (whitener)	6 (100%)	0 (0%)
Nothing	7 (15.2%)	36 (84.8%)

Discussion:

Most children encountered during this study were “children on the street.” The work done by the UNESCO in India and by other workers testify this pattern.^{4,5,6,7,8,9} This study reported predominance of females over males which would perhaps change the common perception among researchers that street

boys are archetype of street children in general.³⁻⁹ The study reported a higher non-enrolment and dropout rates among street children. Mixed results have been reported by researchers with some reporting lower rates^{6,10,11} whereas others reporting higher rates.^{7,9}

In order to escape the unpleasantness of street life, most of the street children indulge in habit of substance abuse. Among the children interviewed, 47.4% had indulged in substance use any time in their life. Other authors have also reported similar findings in their studies.^{12,13,14,15,17,18,19,20,21,22} Substance abuse is one of the coping mechanism used by street children.^{12,19,20} The minimum age at starting substance use in our study was 7 years.^{12,13,14,16,17,18,20,21} There are other studies as well which has reported 5-6 years as age of initiation of substance abuse. The substances commonly abused were cigarettes/bidis, alcohol, gutkha/pan masala. Inhalant substance use in the form of sniffing of thinner/glue were reported by 3 male street children. Similar findings were reported by other investigators.^{14,15,17,19,20,21,22,23}

Substance abuse was further examined by asking children to identify the reasons that initiated them to use the various substances and they reported peer influence, Easy availability, Curiosity, to survive on street, Family influence. Such reasons were also reported by other investigators as well.^{13, 16, 19, 20}

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