

**LIVING CONDITIONS AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF STREET
CHILDREN: A STUDY OF SELECTED WARDS IN KOLKATA
MUNICIPAL AREA**

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Subject: Geography

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ABSTRACT

Most precarious and marginalized classes in metropolitan eco system in India. The present study aims at discussing the demographic background and living conditions of street children in some of these wards with Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The qualitative, observational and document-based research design studied 110 individual cases without any survey instruments applied, which allowed to develop a grounded, field-based comprehension of their realities. Some of the important variables to be investigated are age, gender, shelter type, daily occupation and availability of basic public services. The analysis shows that a high number of these children are in early adolescence and late adolescence with most of them being boys. Children are found in unsafe settlements such as pavements or in makeshift tents and most of them are made to do informal work such as rag-picking, vending and begging. In a frightening manner, very few of them have access to institutional shelters or basic facilities.

Keywords: Street Children, Urban Vulnerability, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Informal Labor, Child Homelessness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of street children is one of the most neglected, vulnerable and deprived groups in the city social set-up of India. These are children who are left without care by their parents, a definite place to live and even identity and have to face the hardship of the city streets on their own. The socio-economic factors that have manifested in recent decades leading to increase in the phenomenon of street children in major cities of India include poverty in urban areas, rural migration to cities, family breakdowns, domestic violence, the occurrence of natural disasters and the ineffectiveness of child protection systems.

Kolkata being an old and the densely populated metropolitan city in India has a good concentration of children of the streets. The city lies on the border of west coastal and north eastern regions of India, hence, being an economic and transport hub in the east, results in a tremendous influx of rural migrants, among them kids who lost contact with their families or migrated with their families due to extreme poverty. Bankruptcy of family systems, shortage of housing and poor welfare system in cities of urban centres have resulted in the multiplication of children who wander and work in streets, train stations, bus stands, the market places and other construction grounds.

The street children in Kolkata are most vulnerable in various ways. They are characterized by being subjected to physical vulnerability, mal nutrition, and insecure conditions in their daily lives. Most of them do odd and dangerous jobs like rag-picking, begging, and selling things or cleaning cars to earn a living. They have little or no access to formal education and healthcare provision and are excluded by social welfare programs of government and thus continue to cycle in poverty, abuse, and marginalization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Banerjee and Malik (2019) carried out a geographical study of quality of life related to slum cluster in Kolkata Municipal Corporation. In their study they evaluated important indicators of cities including housing density, access to clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, access to education and access to healthcare facilities. The paper brought out grim inequalities of resource distribution and brought to limelight that the neglect of administration and spatial marginalization most heavily impacted the population in the slums, especially the children. Although they did not study street children by name in their work, they provided a striking image of the deprived urban situation echoing most of the hardships experienced by at-risk-children in the street, especially regarding exposure to illness, insecurity, and the breach of the learning process.

Basu et al. (2021) it has also investigated the psychological and behavioural vulnerabilities of street children in Kolkata with reference to one particular vulnerability which is substance abuse. The cross-sectional study developed by them was based on data obtained firsthand during research by children themselves who inhabited the streets and the transit areas. The results indicated that tobacco use, alcohol misuse, and inhalant abuse were rampant among children and in most cases started at very tender ages. The factors that were found to be key

contributing drivers were peer pressure, child abuse, single parenting and long-time isolation towards protection social networks. The research also observed that being high helped preserve the mind and was also a way of coping with the realities on the streets in the eyes of kids struggling to find their share of street life.

Bera et al. (2020) encompassed the economical background and the lifestyle of street children in few districts of Kolkata. Their publication provided an elaborated discussion of the informal economy of child labour and street survival activities. The children were also said to be engaged in any kinds of unregulated work as either rag-pickers, sellers of low-priced goods, picking of plastics or running of errands within the streets. The authors insisted that compelling economic condition, which was worsened by disrupted family units and migration pressure, was one of the main reasons why children were being pulled into the streets. The research found out that most of these children were major contributors to the family income and yet had no access to the formal education system and welfare services.

Bhattacharjee and Bhadra (2018) dealt with the general health and environmental risk present in the Kolkata slum settings and much of it coincides with the areas where street children are found. They focused their study on poor sanitation, open sewers, un-regular garbage collection, and a smaller number of safe drinking water. They said that such conditions exposed children to various health risks such as respiratory infection, diarrhea illnesses and skin afflictions. The research made mention of Children especially those who were unguided or not involved in family groups being the most susceptible of these risky living conditions. Although it was not directly focussed on the street children, the results were quite close to their problem of keeping clean, being healthy, and lacking health-related vulnerability in the crowded and unhealthy urban cites.

3. METHODOLOGY

It is a sensitive qualitative, observational, and document-based study that aims at exploring the demographic nature and the living conditions of the street children in the few wards of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The methodology was meant to be devoid of survey or even questionnaire methodologies rather using field grounded techniques which are best suited in establishing real and situational databases on vulnerable people.

3.1 Research Design

This study has adopted a descriptive qualitative research design where emphasis is placed on an empirical observation and interpretative analysis. The design was selected in order to enable a more profound grasping of the structural and environmental conditions related to the impact on the street children, outside of estimable indicators. It enabled researchers to combine several types of qualitative evidence of observation, reviewing of documents, and communicating with stakeholders to create the whole picture of the situation children.

3.2 Sample Size

The following sample of the proposed study will include 110 individual cases of street children with each of them being separately considered as an object of the study. Each case was analysed on various grounds, such as age, sex, place of origin; divided into rural-urban- mobile, nature of shelter; pavement, railway platform, NGO-managed shelter and primary daily activity or occupation; rag-picking, street vending, begging, and access to necessary public facilities; water, sanitation, medical. The sample was not selected with the help of probabilistic methods, but rather with the assistance of purposive and snowball sampling that has been used most commonly in qualitative studies of urban ethnographies and study based in the streets.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section the researcher discusses the demographic and living conditions data of the street children surveyed through 110 documented street children in some of the wards within the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. This analysis rests on the non-survey tools: field observation, communication with support organizations, examination of records in institute. The aim is to determine trends in respect of age, sex, nature of shelter frequented and attendance in activities that contribute to livelihood of the street children. To be more clear and easier to compare, tabular and graphical representation of data is used in every subsection.

4.1 Age-Wise Distribution

The age distribution of the street children is crucial in specific intervention concentrated on training, medical care, and security services. The statistics used in this paper present an idea of the age classes which are mostly impacted by the street life.

Table 1 shows age distribution of 110 street children admitted in the wards selected in Kolkata Municipal Corporation. It characterizes them in four developmental age brackets to emphasize the percentage of children within the early childhood, middle childhood, early adolescence, and late adolescence age bracket.

Table 1: Age-Wise Distribution of Street Children

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 5	9	8.18%
6 – 10	28	25.45%
11 – 14	41	37.27%
15 – 18	32	29.09%

The table and the figure, one can see clearly that the largest percentage of the street children (37.27 %) fall within the age group 11-14 years, which shows a peak at early adolescence. This is a decisive period in life when children are more prone to exploitation, school dropout issues, and depressive state of mind. In line with the older adolescents remaining in unprotected space, the 15-18 years group follows with 29.09 %.

Figure 1 is a Figure which gives a graphical expression of age distribution of the same 110 street children on the basis of percentage. Such visual representation is applied to assist in the definition of age groups that represent the largest portion of the population in question.

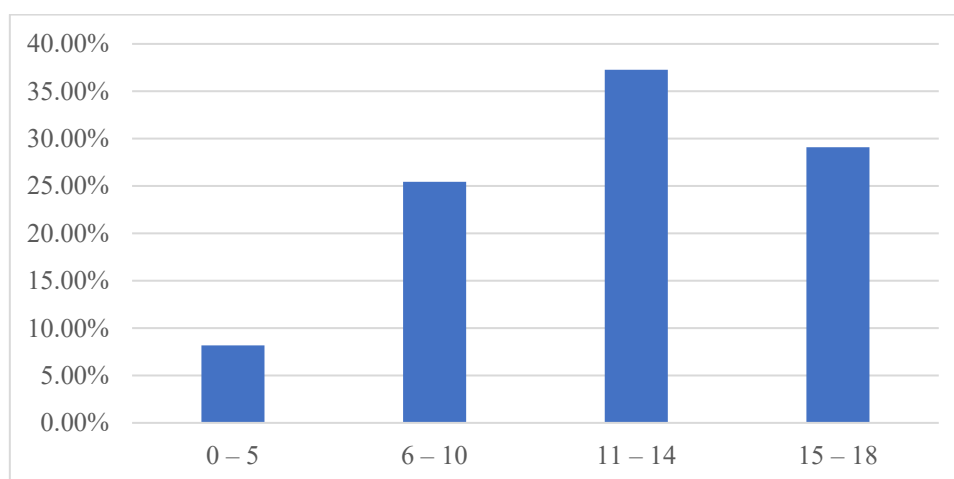


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of the Percentage of Age-Wise Distribution of Street Children

The age category 6-10 years (25.45%) demonstrates that quite many children start living in the streets already at a very early age and the number of children in the age category 0-5 years (8.18%) means the disintegration of families and even the existence of the families on the streets with infants.

4.2 Gender Distribution

Gender has a notable implication in demography of the study of the street child population since it determines the type of risk as well as access to protective services. Insight into gender proportions can direct gender-aware policy frameworks and action plans. In the table below, one finds the gender wise arrangement of the 110 street children sampled in the study, whereas figure 1 gives a visualization of the same. Table 2 indicates a frequency and percent distribution of street children by gender.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Street Children

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	72	65.45%
Female	38	34.55%

So clearly evident in the table and figure is the fact that the street child population is largely dominated by the male gender (65.45 %) whereas the female gender constitutes 34.55 % of the sample.

Figure 2 is a figure that shows a graphical expression to percentage distribution of genders of the sample of street children. It is applied to promote visual comparison and outline gender disparity level.

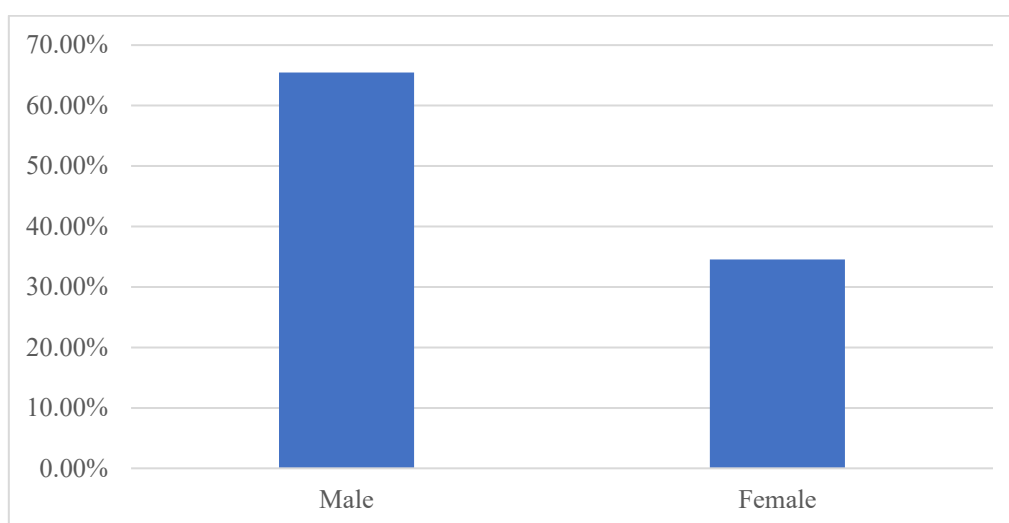


Figure 2: Graphical Representation of the Percentage of Gender Distribution of Street Children

The male children figure is excessively tall depicting that they are largely the ones in category of street children. The female bar is shorter and yet they reproduced more than one/3 of the group indicating that girls are a large but not very much thought of group of the street-living children. The message behind this image concerns the incorporation of welfare programs that indeed makes an allusion to the concerns and risks associated to female street kids.

4.3 Type of Shelter Accessed

One of the most important predictors of the vulnerability of children in the streets and their well-being is their shelter. Shelter is important since the type and quality of shelter a child receives has a huge implication on their safety, hygiene, violence exposure and access to basic services.

Table 3 indicates the different forms of shelter that the street children who participated in the study are using. They include fully open areas like pavements to semi-coverages such as temporary tents and shelters provided by NGOs among others. The table classifies and measures the frequency as well as the percentage of the shelter arrangements of the children.

Table 3: Type of Shelter Accessed (N = 110)

Shelter Type	Frequency	Percentage
Pavements/Roadside	46	41.82%
Temporary Plastic Tents	29	26.36%
Railway Stations	17	15.45%
Night Shelters (NGO)	18	16.36%

As indicated in the table, a majority of 41.82 % of the children sleep in the pavement or beats alone exposed to environmental risks and other security issues. The second most widespread type of shelter is the temporary plastic tents (26.36%), usually being improvised settlements that are built using scraps of material. Worst still, a paltry 16.36 percent of the children stay in the night shelters run by NGOs, which shows that people who require shelter have a smaller access and can reach few formal service providers.

Figure 3 is a horizontal Figure that gives a graphical representation of the percentage proportion of the different types of the shelter that the street children get. The presentation format is useful in comparisons of relative proportions of each type of shelter quickly.

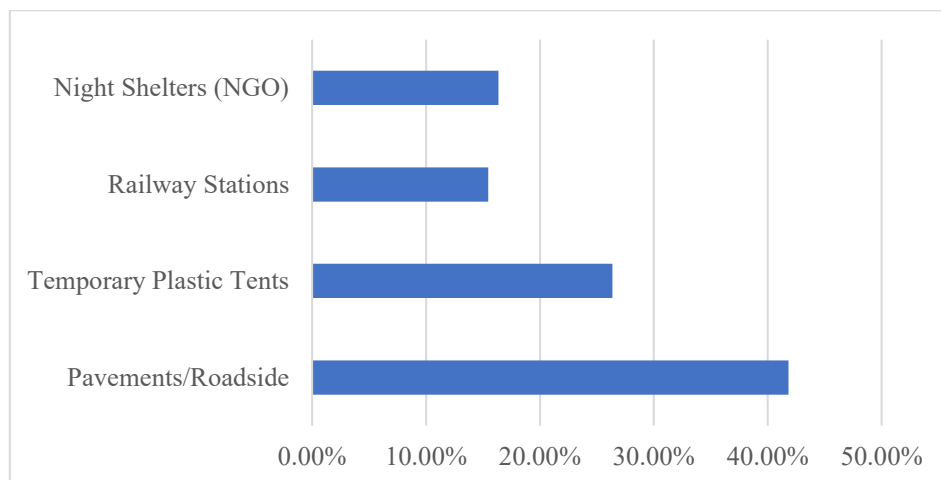


Figure 3: Graphical Representation of the Percentage of Type of Shelter Accessed

The graphical presentation helps to further reaffirm the data provided in Table 3; clear indication is the fact that pavements/roadside sleeping arrangements are predominant with almost half of the children out on the open and public space. The NGO shelters and railway-stations have a much shorter bar, because they are not used and are not available.

4.4 Primary Daily Activity/Occupation

The socio-economic marginalization and vulnerability lead to the adoption of the economic survival means by the street children. These daily chores tend to bring them into contact with various forms of exploitation and working in dangerous conditions and also risking legal liability. These include the informal work such as rag-picking and vending to passive survival modes which include begging. Some of the children could not be explained by a certain activity and are classified as unaccounted/idle.

Table 4: Primary Daily Activity/Occupation (N = 110)

Activity Type	Frequency	Percentage
Rag-picking	35	31.82%
Begging	28	25.45%
Street Vending	21	19.09%
Washing Vehicles	13	11.82%
Unaccounted/Idle	13	11.82%

According to the table, the most prevalent occupation is the rag-picking (31.82%) among the street children and the next thing is begging (25.45%) and street vending 19.09%). They are usually unofficial, unregulated, and low wage - earning activities which are very insecure. The 23.64 % occurrence of children either washing vehicle or incompletely idle/unaccounted (11.82 percent each) leads us to believe that there may not be a steady access to work and therefore, not routine.

The Figure 4 is a horizontal Figure which graphically indicates the percentage of street children involved in various major daily activities. It augments the table by highlighting occupational differences, which are more aesthetic to the view.

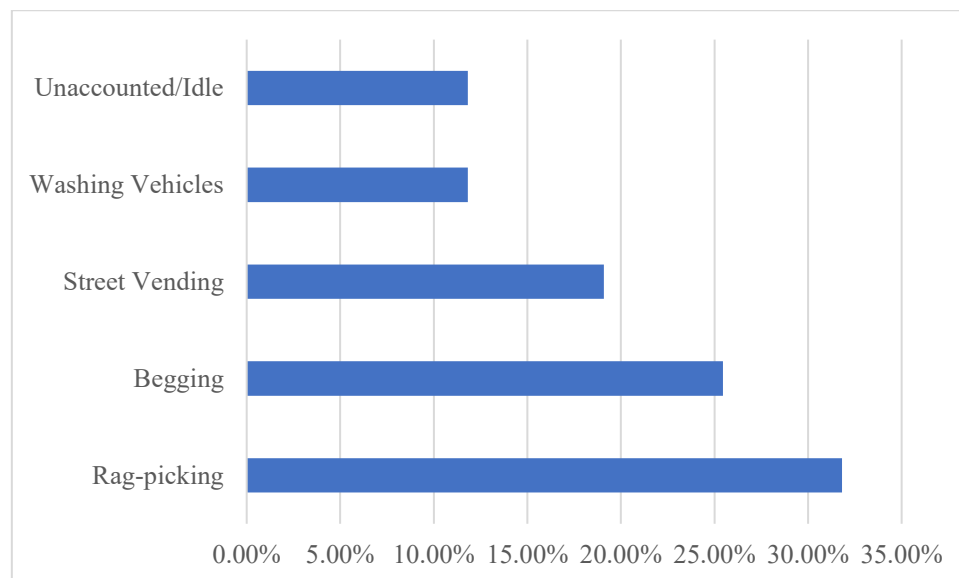


Figure 4: Graphical Representation of the Percentage of Primary Daily Activity/Occupation

The predominance of rag-picking among the children is clearly indicated in the graph followed by the sudden drop in other forms of occupation like begging and street vending. The additional marginality of less structured or occasional engagements is also depicted by the occluded bars of vehicle washing and unaccounted idle children. This illustration reiterates that most of the street children engage in informal labour which has very serious health, legal and psychological hazards and further shows the need of strengthened design of livelihood interventions and child welfare surveillance.

5. CONCLUSION

This research paper gives an elaborate evidence-based description of the life conditions and demographic structure of street children of the selected wards within the Kolkata Municipal

Corporation applying a non-survey and qualitative method that is based on personal observations and interaction with the institution. It captures the lives of 110 children that do not have stable means of shelter, family or channels of formulated care systems. The statistics demonstrated that most of them are in the age range of early adolescence (11-14 years), which is a very vulnerable stage of development, and the percentage of boys is overwhelming, yet girls also comprise a large percentage that requires gender-based interventions. Most of the children make use of unsafe means of protection, such as pavements and temporary homes, and they have access to institutional or NGO-based shelters very rarely. The main actions they engage in, include rag-picking, begging, and selling, which point to extreme vulnerability to livelihood and exploitation and health risks. Such trends point to the dire deficiency of the existing child protection mechanisms in Kolkata. The paper demands immediate multi-stakeholder policy action, which should be manifested in scaling up safe shelters, inclusion in education and professional training, improvement of sanitation and access to medical care, and improved partnership between the government and non-governmental organizations. Finally, the cycle of poverty, marginalization and invisibility that street children experience should be permanently broken by ensuring that the urban welfare agendas act proactively to accommodate the children.

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