

Reintegrating and reducing harmful behaviour and lifestyles in street-connected children: What is the evidence for what works?



SUMMARY

Background

It is estimated that globally around 100 million children and young people are living on the streets. Whilst many children develop resilience to the risks associated with life on the streets, many children are vulnerable to physical, psychological and sexual exploitation and are excluded from mainstream social structures and opportunities. To promote street children's best chances in life, services are needed to reduce these risks and also prevent marginalisation from society. Understanding what services are most likely to be effective in improving outcomes for street children and systematically reviewing all evidence is important for ensuring that resources are invested efficiently and ultimately street children can live safe and healthy lives.

This review aimed to examine the effectiveness of interventions which promoted inclusion and integration and reduced harms. In addition, the review explored the processes of successful interventions and sought to understand how intervention effectiveness may vary in different contexts.

What was done?

The international evidence base of interventions was reviewed. Interventions could involve harm reduction; inclusion or reintegration programmes; increasing literacy, numeracy and self-esteem, increasing participation in education and employment; or providing shelter, housing and drop in support. The research studies had to contain a comparison group (with or without randomization) and look at street connected children between the ages of 0 and 24, regardless of location, reason for street connectedness or gender. The search included all studies that were conducted up until 2012.

What was found?

The eleven studies identified were conducted in the USA, UK and Korea; sufficiently robust evaluations conducted in low and middle income countries were not identified. The interventions compared therapy based services with usual shelter and drop in services and the majority of studies recruited participants through a shelter, drop in service or hostel.

The variation in study quality and the variation in the measurements used by each study made comparing studies difficult. When examining the impacts of the interventions on psychosocial health, substance misuse and sexual risky behaviours, the review found no consistent results. The interventions being evaluated consisted of time-limited therapy based programmes and these did not prove to be more effective than standard shelter or drop in services.

What does the review tell us?

While analysis of the included studies found no consistently significant benefit for the 'new' interventions compared to standard services, the review highlighted a lack of rigorous evaluation of standard shelter and drop in services. Given that the majority of the studies recruited participants exclusively through drop in centres or shelters, it is not possible to examine the effectiveness of interventions for those children who live on the streets and who do not access services. The review also highlighted the significant evidence gap of interventions based in low and middle income countries although many services are delivered in those countries. The review does discuss the relevance of its findings for those countries.

What does the review recommend?

The finding that in most of the studies, the therapeutic intervention did not produce better results than standard services should be taken into consideration during future planning and development of policy and service delivery for street connected children. Scientifically the review recommends that more rigorous evaluations of standard services are carried out, particularly in low and middle income countries. In addition, future research should be guided by characteristics and concerns of street children themselves.

Coren E, Hossain R, Pardo Pardo J, Veras MMS, Chakraborty K, Harris H, Martin AJ. Interventions for promoting reintegration and reducing harmful behaviour and lifestyles in street-connected children and young people. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013. Issue 2.

For more information about this review please contact Esther Coren: esther.coren@canterbury.ac.uk

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