



## **STREET CHILDREN AND THE LAYERED FAILURE OF PROTECTION SYSTEMS: AN ANALYSIS OF DRIVING FACTORS AND THE CYCLE OF VULNERABILITY REPRODUCTION**

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### **Abstract**

Street children represent a profound social challenge, often misperceived as an isolated issue rather than a systemic failure. This literature study posits that the presence of children on the streets is a direct product of collapsed social safety nets at both family and state levels. The analysis identifies a two-phase process. First, the interaction between acute familial pressures such as multidimensional poverty and domestic violence and the state's failure to provide adequate social protection including economic assistance, healthcare, and inclusive education creates the conditions that push children onto the streets. Second, life on the street initiates a self-perpetuating cycle of alienation. This cycle involves disconnection from formal education and healthcare, immersion in exploitative informal economies, traumatic encounters with law enforcement, and internalized social stigma. These interconnected consequences form a closed system that actively reproduces vulnerability, making exit increasingly difficult. The study concludes that street children are not merely recipients of failed systems but are further victimized by the street's substitute ecosystem, which entrenches their marginalization. Therefore, effective intervention requires a fundamental shift towards preventive, family-strengthening social policies and holistic, long-term rehabilitation programs designed to dismantle the cycle of alienation.

**Keywords:** street children, social safety nets, systemic failure, cycle of alienation, child protection, poverty, social stigma.

## Introduction

Social safety nets are policy constructs designed to protect individuals and families from various economic and social shocks throughout the life cycle. These systems encompass a wide range of programs, from social assistance for poor families, universal health insurance, unemployment benefits, to old-age pensions. Ideally, their function is to prevent people from falling into absolute poverty and to ensure the fulfillment of basic human needs, especially for the most vulnerable groups such as children. When these systems function effectively, they act as buffers that stabilize households during crises, provide access to essential services, and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. A country's success in building the welfare of its citizens is often measured by the strength and inclusiveness of its social safety net. However, in reality, the coverage and effectiveness of these systems remain uneven, leaving gaps where individuals can fall through without adequate support (Wagle, 2017). These gaps subsequently give rise to various expressions of extreme vulnerability (Mardikaningsih, 2021).

One of the most visible and heartbreaking expressions of vulnerability is the existence of street children. They are children who spend most of their time in public spaces such as streets, markets, or bus terminals, often to work, beg, or simply survive. Their presence in urban spaces is not a choice made out of freedom, but rather the consequence of accumulated systemic failures. To understand their existence, it is necessary to adopt an approach that goes beyond personal characteristics or family conditions alone and begins to examine the broader social structures that fail to provide a secure foundation for child development (Shrivastava et al., 2014). This perspective seeks to capture the essence of their lived experiences as a reflection of collective failure, where institutions that should provide protection are either absent or dysfunctional (Harani & Mardikaningsih, 2021).

The first and most fundamental failure often occurs at the family level, the social unit that should serve as the primary safety net (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). The burden of poverty, parental unemployment, domestic violence, family breakdown, or prolonged illness without access to treatment can quickly paralyze a family's capacity to provide protection and care. When families experience extreme pressure, children are often the

ones who suffer the most. They may be forced to work to support the household economy, experience violence and neglect, or even be expelled from their homes. In such situations, the family transforms from a source of protection into a source of threat, forcing children to seek safety and livelihoods outside the home. This process demonstrates how family fragility is directly linked to the absence of external support systems that could prevent its collapse (Evendorf et al., 2021).

It is at this point that the role of the state and society, through formal social safety nets, should become active. Programs such as conditional cash transfers, free access to healthcare, family economic empowerment initiatives, and child protection services are designed to intervene before crises within families reach a critical point. However, when these programs fail to reach those who need them most whether due to insufficient budgets, complicated bureaucracy, corruption, or information gaps such interventions do not occur. Children from families who fall through the gaps of this system are left without protection. They are pushed into public spaces without clear legal protection and become vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and various forms of rights violations. The streets, with all their dangers and uncertainties, become a substitute for the home and community that have failed to provide a sense of security (Hartjen & Priyadarsini, 2012).

Therefore, viewing street children merely as an individual or family problem is a dangerous oversimplification. They represent a very clear social indicator of the multilayered failure of protection systems. Their existence is concrete evidence that existing prevention and response mechanisms are not functioning as they should (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). They are the final product of a chain of failures that begins with the inability of families to cope with pressure, continues with the absence of strong community support, and ends with the failure of the state to perform its protective function through comprehensive social policies (Gani et al., 2021). Thus, this study seeks to trace how the gaps within social safety nets at various levels operate in producing and reproducing the lives of children on the streets.

The core of the problem lies in the disconnection between the urgent needs of children in vulnerable situations and the responses provided by the existing social protection system. This system often tends to be reactive and curative, acting only after children have already spent a significant amount

of time on the streets and have experienced complex trauma. A proactive approach that should identify high-risk families and provide early intervention to prevent children from being pushed onto the streets remains very weak. As a result, street children are always treated as a symptom that must be addressed, rather than as an outcome that should be prevented (Paludo & Koller, 2008). Policy and program focus often centers on emergency responses, such as providing shelters or food, without addressing the root causes that force children onto the streets in the first place namely the collapse of the support systems surrounding them.

Another problem lies in the fragmented and non-integrated nature of social safety nets (Islam & Hasan, 2019). Various programs originate from different ministries or agencies, each with distinct criteria, mechanisms, and target groups. A family may receive food assistance but lack access to counseling services to address domestic violence. A child may be enrolled in school through an inclusive education program, yet their family may not be covered by economic assistance programs that could stabilize household income so the child can continue attending school. This lack of integration causes interventions to become partial and incomplete, failing to create an environment that is truly protective for children. Children living in families with such fragmented support remain on the edge of instability, where even a small shock can push them out of their homes and into the cycle of life on the streets.

Understanding street children as a systemic failure, rather than merely a moral or criminal issue, carries significant academic and policy implications. In the field of social policy, this perspective shifts the burden of responsibility away from individuals and families who are often perceived as deficient, toward the design and implementation of systems that are considered to have failed. This paradigm shift opens space for a more critical evaluation of the effectiveness of government programs and for the design of more structural interventions. Studies of this nature can provide strong conceptual evidence for policymakers to design social safety nets that are more responsive, integrated, and prevention-oriented, with a focus on strengthening the capacity of families and communities before crises occur (Fajar et al., 2021).

At the global level, the commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the first goal on poverty eradication and the

tenth goal on reducing inequality, requires an inclusive and comprehensive approach (Kakuru et al., 2019). Street children represent one of the most marginalized groups and are often not counted in development statistics. Discussing them through the lens of social safety net failure directly links this issue to the broader development agenda, namely the creation of universal social protection systems. This study is therefore relevant to ensure that in the pursuit of global targets, no child is left behind, and that development is also measured by the ability of a system to protect the most vulnerable members of society.

This study aims to critically analyze the causal relationship between the weaknesses and failures of social safety net systems and the emergence as well as the persistence of street children's lives. Specifically, this literature review seeks to explain the mechanisms at both the micro level (family) and the macro level (state) that cause children to be pushed onto the streets, as well as to analyze how life experiences on the streets subsequently reinforce their separation from formal protection systems. The expected theoretical contribution is the development of an analytical framework that views street children as an outcome of systemic failure processes, rather than as isolated entities. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a basis for formulating policy recommendations oriented toward prevention and the strengthening of integrated and inclusive social protection systems.

## Method

This research is designed as a qualitative literature study aimed at building a comprehensive understanding of street children as a manifestation of the failure of social safety net systems. A qualitative approach was chosen because it aligns with the objective of exploring and interpreting abstract concepts in depth, such as systemic vulnerability, protection failure, and cycles of marginalization (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This method allows researchers to delve into the complexity of social phenomena by analyzing various existing literature sources, including sociological theories, empirical research findings, policy analyses, and institutional reports. The focus lies on synthesis and critical interpretation to identify patterns, causal relationships, and meanings behind the existence of street children, going beyond mere statistical

description. This process is constructive in nature, where the researcher actively develops arguments and new frameworks of understanding based on an established body of knowledge.

The implementation procedure follows the principles of systematic literature studies adapted for qualitative research purposes. The first stage involves formulating clear guiding questions, which have been outlined in the research problem statement. Subsequently, an extensive literature search was conducted through academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, as well as relevant institutional repositories. The main keywords include "street children", "social safety nets", "child protection systems", "social exclusion", "vulnerable families", and "policy failure". The selection criteria include peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, dissertations, and official reports from organizations such as UNICEF and ILO that discuss structural aspects of the lives of street children. After the sources were collected, a thematic content analysis was conducted as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involves in-depth reading, coding of textual data, and grouping codes into emerging themes such as "family-level push factors", "gaps in state policy", and "mechanisms of exclusion on the streets". These themes were then analyzed to examine the relationships and dynamics among them, with the aim of constructing a coherent analytical narrative that answers the research questions. The validity of the study was maintained through source triangulation, namely the use of diverse types of documents to build a robust understanding.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Interaction of Family and State Failures in Producing Street Children**

The existence of street children cannot be understood as an isolated event or a voluntary decision made by a child. It represents the end point of a long process in which various layers of protection that should support a child's life gradually collapse. This process begins within the most basic social unit, the family. In its ideal function, the family acts as a primary safety net that provides physical needs, emotional security, and value socialization. However, when the family itself is struck by acute structural poverty, this pressure erodes its capacity to fulfill those basic functions. Poverty here is not merely a lack of money, but a multidimensional condition that includes

the absence of access to adequate housing, nutritious food, education, and healthcare. In such an environment, parents often struggle desperately just to maintain the biological survival of the family, leaving very limited attention and resources for proper caregiving. Children in this situation grow up in an atmosphere of constant uncertainty and deprivation, where their developmental needs are overshadowed by the urgency of meeting daily basic needs (Safira et al., 2021).

This economic incapacity of the family is often exacerbated by other internal destabilizing factors, such as domestic violence, parental conflict, chronic illness, or the death of a primary breadwinner. These events function as triggers that push already fragile families beyond their threshold of tolerance. A child who experiences violence at home may view the streets as a safer escape, even though they are full of risks. A child whose parents suffer from severe illness without access to health insurance may feel compelled to seek income to sustain the survival of the entire family. At this point, a child's decision to spend time on the streets or even leave home entirely emerges as a tragic coping strategy. It is not a choice made from a position of strength or freedom, but rather a response to a home environment that has failed to provide safety and support (Ruiz-Casares & Rousseau, 2010). Thus, the family, which should serve as a fortress of protection, instead transforms into a source of threat and unbearable pressure.

It is at this point that the role of the state, through formal social safety nets, should intervene as a secondary support system. This system is designed to prevent the total collapse of families by providing economic assistance, access to social services, and legal protection (Mokomane, 2013). However, the failure of the state to provide a robust and inclusive safety net is a key factor that allows crises at the family level to continue without intervention. This failure can take several forms. First is the failure of coverage, where social assistance programs fail to reach the poorest and most remote families due to limited budgets, corruption, or poorly targeted program designs. Second is the failure of design, where the assistance provided is partial, temporary, or insufficient to lift families out of the poverty that makes them vulnerable. Monthly food assistance, for example, may alleviate hunger but does not resolve parental

unemployment or the lack of access to children's education (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021).

The interaction between family failure and state failure is synergistic and mutually reinforcing (Goldstone, 2008). A family experiencing economic shock will seek a buffer from the state. If that buffer does not exist, is weak, or is difficult to access, the shock can cause permanent damage to the family structure, such as children dropping out of school or household breakdown. This damage further increases family vulnerability and widens their distance from the ability to access available assistance, as they may lose identity documents, information, or the capacity to meet complex administrative requirements. In other words, the absence of a state safety net not only allows families to fall, but also ensures that once they fall, it becomes even more difficult for them to rise again. Children in such families become the ones who suffer the most, as their future is sacrificed in order to resolve the crisis of the present.

A specific form of state failure that is particularly decisive in the context of child protection is the absence or weakness of an integrated and effectively functioning child protection system. An ideal system, as formulated within the international child rights framework, should include early detection mechanisms to identify children at risk, comprehensive family support services to strengthen caregiving capacity, appropriate alternative care when separation from parents is necessary, and child-friendly justice systems. However, in the reality of many countries, these systems are often fragmented across institutions, lack adequate resources, and operate reactively rather than preventively, thus failing to meet basic protection standards (Gilbert et al., 2011). Child protection officers in the field may have limited authority, excessive caseloads, and may be unable to conduct meaningful early interventions before serious violations of children's rights occur, a structural challenge that has long been identified in the social policy literature (Munro, 2011). As a result, children living in families with complex problems such as poverty, dysfunction, or violence often remain invisible to the system until they appear on the streets or become victims of severe abuse that draws public attention. This proactive failure means that the state essentially acts only after significant damage has already occurred, after the child has experienced deep trauma, and

after social bonds with family and community have begun to break down, which significantly complicates the process of recovery and reintegration (Saktiawan et al., 2021).

Cultural factors and social norms also play a role in influencing how the state and society respond to vulnerable families. Stigma toward poverty and dependence on social assistance can prevent families from seeking the help they need (Reutter et al., 2009). At the same time, the perception that child-rearing is purely a private matter may cause neighbors and communities to hesitate to intervene or report cases of child neglect to the authorities. These social norms create an informal barrier that shields violence and neglect within households from public scrutiny. The state, by adopting an overly respectful stance toward family autonomy, often hesitates to intervene except in very extreme cases. This combination of silent social norms and overly cautious state policies creates a gray area in which children may suffer in silence, beyond the reach of any protection system, until they eventually choose or are forced to move into public spaces.

Migration from rural areas to urban centers also illustrates this interaction of failures. Many families migrate with the hope of finding better economic opportunities in the city. However, they often arrive without strong social networks, appropriate skills, or adequate information. They become stranded in urban slums with limited access to basic city services. Social safety net systems, which are often tied to official residential addresses or specific population status, fail to reach these migrant populations. Children in migrant families become highly vulnerable because their parents may work extremely long hours for low wages, leaving children without supervision. When migrant families fail to survive in the city, children are the most likely to be pushed onto the streets, as they have few ties to the local community and little knowledge of how to access assistance if it exists. Poorly managed urbanization processes thus accelerate the disconnection of children from traditional protection systems both in their villages of origin and in their destination cities (Rojak & Putra, 2021).

Education, which should function as both a safety net and a pathway for social mobility, often fails in its role (Hariani et al., 2021). Hidden educational costs, such as uniforms, books, and transportation, can become insurmountable barriers for poor families. Moreover, when a child

must work to support the household economy, school becomes a secondary activity that can easily be sacrificed. An education system that is rigid and insensitive to the needs of poor children can quickly make them feel excluded and lead them to drop out. Schools should ideally function as institutions capable of identifying early signs of difficulties among children, such as chronic lateness, declining academic performance, or indications of violence. However, when schools lack resources, teachers are overburdened, or clear protocols for referring cases to social services are absent, opportunities for early intervention are lost. The breakdown of a child's connection with the education system represents a major step toward life on the streets, as the child loses daily structure, peer relationships, and a potential protector in the figure of a teacher.

The cumulative impact of the interaction of these failures is the creation of a condition of "absence of protection." Children no longer feel safe at home, are not protected by the state through effective policies, are disconnected from school, and are often not supported by the surrounding community (McDonnell et al., 2015). In such a vacuum of protection, the streets emerge as the only alternative that appears reasonable. The streets offer, albeit illusorily, a form of independence, opportunities to earn money, and a community of fellow street children who understand their experiences. The decision to go to the streets thus becomes the result of a tragic calculation in which all other options have been closed or perceived as worse. It is the final manifestation of a process in which every layer of the system designed to prevent a child from falling has failed to perform its function.

Street children, therefore, are living evidence of a cascading failure. They are indicators that preventive mechanisms at the family level have collapsed, that the state's social support systems have not reached them, that schools have failed to retain them, and that communities are either insufficiently concerned or insufficiently empowered to intervene (Rasmus et al., 2014). They are not the cause of the problem, but rather its most visible consequence. Understanding this process requires us to view street children not as objects of charity or control, but as subjects whose life trajectories are shaped by structural gaps within our social institutions. The starting point of their presence on the streets can always be traced back to a moment when appropriate intervention could have occurred, but never did.

The emergence of street children into street life is the product of a complex interactive dynamic between micro-level and macro-level failures. Extreme pressures at the family level, including multidimensional poverty, violence, and disintegration, create strong push factors (Admasu et al., 2021). However, these pressures would not automatically produce street children if a functioning state social safety net existed as a shock absorber. The failure of the state to provide an inclusive, proactive, and integrated system covering economic assistance, child protection, access to healthcare, and education becomes the decisive enabling factor. It is the interaction between push factors from the family and the absence of protective buffers from the state that ultimately drives children out of the orbit of formal protection systems and into the world of the streets. This process is cumulative and gradual, where each layer of protection that fails accelerates the child's descent into a harsh and unprotected life in public spaces.

### **Cycle of Alienation: The Consequences of Street Life and the Reproduction of Social Vulnerability**

Once a child enters street life, they enter an ecosystem with its own logic and dynamics that actively distances them from formal social protection systems. The experience of living on the streets is not a static condition, but rather a process of transformation that increasingly solidifies the child's separation from mainstream society (Freeman & Tranter, 2012). This process creates a cycle of alienation that is difficult to break, in which the consequences of living on the streets themselves become the causes that maintain and even deepen the condition. This cycle begins with the way the streets reshape the child's identity and social world. On the streets, children quickly learn that their value is determined by their ability to survive, earn money, and navigate danger. Their previous identities as students, family members, or members of a particular community gradually fade and are replaced by a new identity as "street children," a label often burdened with stigma and prejudice. This label, although imposed from outside, is eventually internalized and shapes how children perceive themselves and the possibilities of their future.

Disconnection from the formal education system is one of the most decisive consequences of street life, which simultaneously functions as a key mechanism reproducing cycles of vulnerability and intergenerational

poverty (Evendi et al., 2021). Children living on the streets quickly encounter nearly insurmountable difficulties in maintaining attendance and meaningful participation in school (Scanlon, 2012). Their unpredictable schedules, economic pressure to work at certain hours to earn income, and the lack of practical and emotional support to complete school assignments make it nearly impossible for them to follow standard curricula and rigid academic expectations (Tyler & Melander, 2015). Schools, with their disciplinary structures and expectations, begin to feel unfamiliar and irrelevant to the harsh and urgent realities of daily survival. Dropping out of school, therefore, is not merely the loss of academic learning opportunities, but also the loss of access to a structured social environment, relationships with teachers who could serve as caring and supportive figures, and important social interactions with peers from different backgrounds (Aron & Zweig, 2019). The absence of formal education permanently restricts the horizon of future opportunities for these children, effectively confining them to low-income, unstable, and unprotected forms of employment in adulthood. Thus, this educational disconnection directly increases the likelihood that they will remain trapped in structural poverty and potentially give rise to the next generation facing similar vulnerabilities.

Health, both physical and mental, represents another arena in which the cycle of vulnerability is reinforced. Harsh living conditions on the streets such as malnutrition, exposure to extreme weather, lack of sanitation, and high risks of violence make children vulnerable to various illnesses. Access to formal healthcare services is often hindered by the absence of identification documents, fear of mistreatment by officials, or inability to pay for services. Untreated health problems can reduce children's capacity to work or earn a living, which in turn pushes them to take greater risks or become more dependent on dangerous survival mechanisms. At the same time, the mental health of street children is also severely affected. Experiences of trauma, feelings of abandonment, continuous stigmatization, and chronic survival pressure can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and the use of illicit substances as a way of coping with emotional pain. These mental health disorders further disrupt children's cognitive and social capacities, making it increasingly difficult for them to

build healthy relationships or engage in rehabilitation programs that require emotional stability (Safira et al., 2021).

Children's social networks also undergo a radical reconfiguration (Gerrard, 2016). Relationships with their families of origin may still exist but often become strained and functional, frequently revolving only around the remittance of money earned by the child. Meanwhile, on the streets, children build new relationships with fellow street children and other actors within the street economy, such as local thugs, vendors, or their service users. These new networks, although providing a certain sense of solidarity and protection, are generally exclusive and isolated from the broader society. Solidarity within street groups is often built upon shared experiences of suffering and resistance against an outside world perceived as hostile. These networks can trap children within a subculture with different values and norms, where risky behaviors are considered normal and violence is seen as a tool for resolving problems. Attachment to these networks makes it difficult for children to leave, because leaving the streets means abandoning the only social support system they possess, without any guarantee of being accepted back by their families or society.

Involvement in informal street-based economic activities such as begging, busking, selling goods, or engaging in sex work further binds children to this cycle (Abebe, 2008). These activities provide immediate income necessary for survival today, but they do not build skills or social capital that can be transferred to the formal economic sector in the future. Even worse, these activities often involve exploitation by more powerful actors, keeping children in positions of subordination and dependency. Consumption patterns that develop also tend to be immediate, as money earned today must be spent to meet today's needs, with little or no savings for the future. This subsistence economic logic contradicts the long-term investment logic required to escape poverty, such as investing in education or skills training (Mosse, 2007). Thus, work on the streets becomes a mechanism that ensures the daily reproduction of poverty.

Relationships with law enforcement agencies and the justice system are often confrontational and deepen the sense of alienation (Bell, 2017; Loyens, 2015). Street children, due to their activities in public spaces, are more vulnerable to arrest, abuse, or criminalization. They may be detained on charges of begging, loitering, or other minor offenses. Experiences of

dealing with police, prisons, or detention centers can be highly traumatic and reinforce the perception that the state is not a protector, but rather a threat. This belief makes them reluctant to report when they become victims of more serious crimes, such as rape or human trafficking. They may also avoid contact with social workers or welfare officers whom they perceive as part of the same system. This distance from law enforcement institutions creates a zone of impunity around street children, where they become easy targets for criminals because they are known to be unlikely to report crimes, while simultaneously diminishing their sense of citizenship and their right to protection.

The social stigma attached to the status of “street child” functions as a powerful psychological and social barrier to reintegration (Eslaminejad, 2016). The broader society often views them with a mixture of pity, fear, and contempt. They are perceived as disturbances to public order, potential sources of crime, or symbols of moral failure. This stigma makes it difficult for them to obtain decent employment, rent housing, or even be accepted in ordinary social interactions. These prejudices can also be internalized by the street children themselves, a phenomenon known as self-stigma, in which they begin to believe that they are indeed of low value, incapable, and deserving of poor treatment. This self-stigma paralyzes motivation for change, because any effort appears futile in the face of a wall of prejudice believed to be impenetrable. Thus, stigma is not merely an external attitude but becomes an internal force that actively keeps children trapped within the cycle of alienation.

Intervention and rehabilitation programs provided by the state or NGOs often fail to break this cycle because they do not understand or appreciate the logic and appeal of the streets from the child’s perspective. Programs that offer temporary shelter, short training, or moral advice without addressing the roots of trauma, without building genuine relationships of trust, and without providing realistic and fully supported transition pathways tend to fail (Gonzalez et al., 2012). Many children leave such programs and return to the streets, because the streets, despite all their shortcomings, still feel more predictable, more autonomous, and more capable of fulfilling their psychological needs for freedom and peer solidarity (Martinez, 2010). The failure of these intervention programs further reinforces the narrative in the child’s mind that the “official” world

is of no use to them, and that the only place where they are accepted is the street.

The process of aging on the streets also shows how this cycle continues into adulthood. A child who grows up on the streets becomes an adolescent and later a young adult in the same environment. Without education, formal skills, or social networks outside the street world, their choices are extremely limited (Ramle, 2021). They may shift from begging to unstable manual labor, or become increasingly entangled in illegal activities. Their health may already be damaged by years of harsh living. They struggle to form stable families, and if they have children, there is a strong possibility that those children will face the same risks being born into highly vulnerable circumstances and potentially repeating the life cycle of their parents. Thus, the streets not only destroy childhood, but also deprive individuals of a productive adulthood and become the starting point for the intergenerational transmission of vulnerability.

This cycle of alienation is essentially a self-enclosing system. Every negative consequence of street life dropping out of school, health problems, limited social networks, involvement in subsistence economies, negative experiences with law enforcement, and stigma works together to make every attempt to leave more difficult. These factors reinforce one another and create a condition of dependence on the streets as the only environment that is understood and that provides identity. To break this cycle, interventions cannot simply “rescue” children from the streets physically. Interventions must be able to compete with the complexity of the streets’ appeal and logic by offering an alternative that is not only materially safer, but also capable of restoring self-confidence, building relevant skills, providing genuine and sustained social support, and actively challenging the stigma attached to their former identity (Byrne, 2013).

Life on the streets is not merely a temporary place of residence, but an active mechanism that produces and reproduces social vulnerability (Warr, 2013). Entering the world of the streets triggers a series of interrelated consequences: disengagement from formal education and healthcare, the formation of isolated social networks, involvement in an exploitative subsistence economy, traumatic experiences with the legal system, and the internalisation of a crippling stigma. These consequences do not stand alone, but are interlocked, forming a cycle that makes it

increasingly difficult for children to leave the streets. This cycle transforms the streets from a mere refuge into a complete system of life, with its own rules, values, and survival mechanisms, effectively replacing the formal social protection system that had previously failed to reach them. Thus, street children are not only the initial product of the failure of the safety net, but subsequently also become victims of a substitute system that actually perpetuates their alienation and poverty.

## Conclusion

This literature review clearly demonstrates that the existence of street children cannot be separated from the systemic failure of social safety net systems. The analysis reveals layered causal relationships, beginning with the interaction between extreme pressures at the family level and the absence of effective buffers from the state. Multidimensional poverty, domestic violence, and family disintegration function as primary driving factors; however, these factors only push children to the streets when the state's social protection system including economic assistance, health services, inclusive education, and proactive child protection fails to function as a shock absorber. Furthermore, this review confirms that life on the streets itself is not an endpoint, but rather the beginning of a cycle of alienation that actively reproduces vulnerability. Disconnection from education, deterioration of physical and mental health, involvement in exploitative subsistence economies, negative experiences with law enforcement, and the burden of social stigma mutually reinforce one another, forming an ecosystem that increasingly distances children from the possibility of reintegration. Thus, street children are both a product and a victim of a chain of failures that begins with the collapse of micro- and macro-level protection, and is perpetuated by the consequences of living within a harsh and closed substitute system on the streets.

The findings of this review carry fundamental implications for social policy and child protection practices. First, the main implication is the need for a paradigm shift from reactive and curative approaches focused on handling children who are already on the streets toward proactive and preventive approaches that focus on strengthening families and closing the gaps within the social safety net system. This means allocating greater resources to prevention programs, such as adequate conditional cash

transfers, integrated family support services, and universal access to health and education. Second, this review implies that interventions for children already living on the streets must be designed with a deep understanding of the cycle of alienation. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs must be comprehensive, long-term, and focused on breaking each link in the cycle, ranging from health and trauma recovery, to the development of life and vocational skills, and the provision of sustainable social support and housing. Third, for civil society and academics, this review implies the importance of deconstructing stigma against street children and advocating for perspectives that view them as victims of systemic failure rather than as social problems that must be eliminated.

Based on these findings and implications, several strategic recommendations are proposed. First, for governments, it is recommended to map and strengthen social safety net systems based on the principles of universality and inclusion, ensuring that no families including migrants and other marginalized populations are left behind. This includes integrating services across ministries and establishing an integrated information system for early identification of at-risk families. Second, for social service institutions and NGOs, it is recommended to develop relationship-based and long-term intervention models. These models should place trust as the foundation, involve former street children as mentors, and provide intensive accompaniment throughout the transition process toward independence, including support for housing, employment, and new social networks. Third, for future researchers, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies that follow the trajectories of street children who successfully exit the cycle, in order to identify critical factors that support long-term reintegration success. Fourth, policy advocacy is needed to reform policies that criminalize street children and instead strengthen justice systems that genuinely protect and restore their rights.

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**Street Children and the Layered Failure of Protection Systems: An Analysis of Driving Factors and the Cycle of Vulnerability Reproduction**  
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