The Challenge of Street Children and Their Families

JEFF ANDERSON

Abstract
Statistics paint a grim picture of the rising number of those living in poverty and children living and working on the streets. Effective outreach to street children involves more than seeing them as unsaved souls. It must involve caring about their needs: emotional, social, and physical as well as spiritual. Ministry to those living on the streets presents unique challenges and requires teamwork and a long-term commitment. Some methods are bearing fruit, including the STTeam ministry of Action International Ministries which partners with local churches and agencies.

Bio: Rev. Jeff Anderson (jeff@actionintl.org) is Associate International Director of Action International Ministries and Senior Consultant and Advocate for Children-in-Crisis Ministries. He and his wife Mary Ann have worked in Manila, Philippines, since 1985 ministering to street children, prisoners and prostitutes and doing disaster relief and development.

Introduction

When we see a street boy or girl, what do we see? If we even see them? Sometimes we do not see street children because they blend into the shadows filled with the dirt, grim, garbage and pollution of our large cities. However, street kids are all around us as they roam day and night looking for something to eat and for recyclable trash to sell at nearby junk shops. They sleep on sidewalks, under bridges or awnings of businesses where there are lights, and under the watchful eyes of night guards. They play and have sexual relations with each other even though they are not legally married but often paired off “on the mat.” They in turn have babies and raise their children on the streets.

As a missionary with Action International Ministries I have worked among street children and their families in the massive slums and on the congested streets of Metro Manila, Philippines, for almost 27 years. I have seen these children and their activities and ministered to them. Jesus loves these people, and He looks beyond their appearance and mannerisms. He is not offended by their smell or their language. As followers of Christ, we need His eyes and heart toward these people. That begins with learning about them and their lives.

Who are street children? UNICEF developed the earliest definitions and categories for street children:
Children of the street (street-living children), who sleep in public spaces, without their families;
Children on the street (street-working children), who work on the streets during the day and return to their family at night to sleep; and
Street family children who live with their families on the street.
In my experience working among street children there is considerable overlap among these categories.
Poverty Is the Root Cause

Poverty is the primary cause of children living and working on the streets. Here are some startling statistics:

Almost one and half billion people live on less than $1.25 USD per day. That is one fifth of the world’s population that is living in extreme poverty.\(^1\)

Approximately 925 million people suffer daily from hunger. The global rise in food prices and the worldwide economic crisis have had a huge impact on the number of hungry people.\(^2\)

UNICEF reports that the number of street children is growing, and while the exact number is difficult to ascertain, the figure is at least in the tens of millions.\(^3\)

The estimate of children living on the streets of Manila is between 50,000 and 75,000. Of these less than 10% are being served by one or more of the 110 non-government organizations (NGOs) with projects designed to assist street children.\(^4\)

**Studies on Manila’s Street Children**

A survey of street children in the Philippines shows that the primary reason they live on the streets is problems at home.
They may be physically abused by parents or siblings (21%).
They do not like their own homes (21%).
They were abandoned by their parents or do not know where they are (15%).
Their parents are separated or because of a step parent (6%).
They must earn money (3%).
Their basic needs are not being met at home (2%).\(^5\)

One research project conducted with adolescents found that:
Most claimed to stay on the streets day and night (82%).
The main risk of being on the streets was being arrested by abusive law enforcers (44%).
Abuse on the streets was perpetrated by their peers (48%) and law enforcers (38%).
Many indicated they participated in crimes such as picking pockets, prostitution and petty extortion in order to meet their daily needs (33%).
There was a high prevalence of substance abuse (69%).\(^6\)


A report done for UNICEF indicates that close to 20 million or 60% of the 33.1 million children and youth in the Philippines are “in specially difficult circumstances” such as the threat of exploitation.\footnote{Consortium for Street Children. “Street Children Statistics compiled by Sara Escolhao Gomes,” pp. 2, 5. On line. \url{http://www.streetchildren.org.uk}. Accessed June 12, 2012.}

Street children account for about 3\% of the child and youth population of Metro Manila. In most cases, the families of these children migrated to Metro Manila from poor provinces to look for work. Lacking urban skills and with the tremendous competition for employment opportunities, family members find themselves unemployed or underemployed. The result is that all family members must work to help support the family. In 1990-91 we studied street children in Cubao, Quezon City, and the Monumento area of Caloocan City, and learned that most children earned their incomes from vending, begging or prostitution. Their average weekly income was $4.00-8.00 USD.

In our study we found more older boys and younger girls. The age brackets for the boys were 11-12 and 14-15 years of age. However, in Cubao, many boys were 16-23 years old. Most of the girls were 10-11, and their reason for being on the streets was to work. The boys said they either ran away or were driven from home by their parents. Half of our respondents indicated they slept at home. The rest said they slept under the Light Rail Transit stations, in parking lots, on the streets or in other outside places. Those who slept outside their homes used cardboard boxes for mats and bedding, and during bad weather they took shelter in nearby buildings.

A research project by sociologist Persida D. Evia at the University of the Philippines looked at the perceptions of street children about themselves, their families, street life and agency programs.\footnote{Jeff Anderson, 
Restoring Children of the Streets: A Condensed Guide for Mobilizing and Equipping God’s People around the World, (Manila, Philippines, Action International Ministries, 2007), pp10-12.} She found that street children usually have a poor self-image even before they leave home, but even more so after being on the streets. While they have left home due to a multitude of reasons such as family break-up, parental abuse and beatings, lack of space, food and money, basically these kids are just like other children. They like to play, help with household chores and learn new things. They value education and good family relationships. Even though children are on the streets, many still communicate with their parents. Most of the children still prefer a home atmosphere to the streets. Some desire to go home to be with their parents, siblings and other relatives.\footnote{Jeff Anderson, Restoring Children of the Streets, pp10-12.}

\footnote{Jeff Anderson, Restoring Children of the Streets, pp10-12.}
Most children have not been lured to the streets by someone. They have come to like the streets because of things such as the money, freedom, leisure, friends, and vices. However, they also have problems on the street which they may not have had at home such as hunger, the need to beg, beatings by older street people or police, imprisonment, sexual molestation, lack of sanitation, no place to sleep, and no one to care for them when they become ill. But to meet these needs they form friendships with other street people, and they also have the option of going to social welfare agencies for assistance.\(^{10}\)

Usually these children hope that someday they will be able to finish their studies, have a profession, and become employed at a stable job so they can provide for themselves and their families. They want to prevent their siblings from becoming street children. They long for the day when they have a good family where love is felt, where they understand one another and where there is no more fighting, shouting, cursing and beatings. They also look forward to raising families of their own.\(^{11}\)

They generally view agencies positively except that they still ask for more basic and recreational assistance and facilities such as education and opportunities for employment than the agencies provide. Some do run away from the centers that social welfare agencies provide. This may be because even though they have gratitude for what is provided there are still many unmet needs. Reasons cited included lack of space, the manner of discipline use by the staff, boredom, lack of education and employment, peer-related fighting and lack of freedom. They have a sense of security in earning and handling their own money on the streets, and they like the freedom to do whatever they want. Also, peer influence is very strong.\(^{12}\)

If a street child has a family, they also need to be counseled and assisted. Some children want to be reconciled to their families, and others do not. Those wanting to be reconciled may hope that their parents have changed for the good, or they may be tired of street life, missing family and desiring a better future. Reasons for not wanting reconciliation include family problems not being resolved, fear of having family clashes again, their parents cannot afford to send them to school, or a sense that if they return they will go back to the old ways of fighting and gambling. Some who have attempted reconciliation have returned to the streets. They may not be ready, their parents may not have changed or friends from the street may influence them to return.\(^{13}\)

### Changing Lives

After almost 35 years of full-time ministry (eight in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, and 27 in Manila, Philippines) among drug addicts, prostitutes, pimps, the homeless, the poor, prisoners, street children and patients in mental hospitals, I am more convinced than ever that the message of Jesus Christ is the only hope for people. It has the power to change the course of a person’s

\(^{10}\) Jeff Anderson, *Restoring Children of the Streets*, pp10-12.


life for now and eternity. People are looking for real answers to their searching questions and real solutions to their problems. With so many religions and messages being peddled today as the answer to mankind’s dilemmas, we must present the gospel clearly. How do we do that in ministry to street children?

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said “If you want to give a tract to a hungry man, wrap it in a sandwich.” In our work with street children two very important questions go hand-in-hand. They are simple but basic to our ministry: “Do you know Jesus?” and “Have you had anything to eat?” There is a temptation in the work of evangelism to see people only as souls to be saved, but people do not see themselves that way. They need to be met at their point of perceived need. The other extreme is to be only doing social work, that is, feeding, medical work, literacy, and vocational training and ignore people’s deepest and greatest need which is to be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. Dr. E. Stanley Jones put it this way “An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body, and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse.”

Go When and Where They Hang Out
When we go out to minister to street kids we go when and where they are available. We go to areas of the city known for street children. These locations are usually very crowded, busy and polluted with lots of garbage on the streets. There is so much exhaust from the traffic that at times it is very difficult to breathe. The spiritual warfare is real. The kids learn greed, lust, rebellion, and manipulation on the street so it takes a long time to build a trusting relationship with street children. They have their culture so we’ve learned it is easier to get kids off the streets than to get the streets out of the kids. There is no way we can feel their chronic hunger, abuse, neglect and abandonment. They are high on drugs mostly from sniffing glue and paint thinner which helps them cope with their hunger and miserable plight. One boy of about 12 years old, when asked why he sniffs paint thinner said, “It is like heaven.” When he answered me I sort of understood him because if I was in his situation I would also be tempted to be high all the time.

Becoming an Effective Street Worker
What does it take to be a worker among street children? Primarily a street worker needs a calling, motivation and burden from the Lord Jesus Christ because the need is for long-term committed workers. The workers need to love the people of the city and the city itself. They need to see children not just as souls to be saved but as people who need human care. The worker must be spiritually, mentally and physically prepared and stable in order to engage the city and her poor. Having pity for the needy is not enough because pity will run dry very quickly. Workers need the compassion of Jesus which will move them from an emotional response to an action response. They must be team players in ministry and not lone-rangers. At times a worker may pioneer a work in a new area and work alone for a brief time, but this is rare. Working as a team provides a variety of ministry gifts, skills, fellowship, protection and opportunities for evaluation. Also a

---


worker must have a genuine walk with Christ which includes regular time set aside for prayer and Bible reading.

**Challenges to the Calling of Being a Worker with Street Children**

Work with street children is not easy. First and foremost it requires a special calling from God of which there can be no uncertainty. It involves spiritual warfare because kids who use drugs open themselves up to demons which have a powerful grip on them. Only through prayer, the Word of God, consistent tough love, and sometimes fasting can there be a spiritual breakthrough.

According to Ron Homenuke, an ACTION missionary who has worked 27 years with street children, some of the challenges these workers face include those to:

Life – The drug scene is dangerous, downright scary and forces a worker into a closer walk with Jesus Christ. Regularly newspapers report that a drug addict has killed someone or him/herself, or we hear about these deaths on the streets. Personal experience confirms there are many kids who sniff glue or paint thinner daily, and these lead to dangerous behavior.

Health – Street children commonly carry diseases because keeping clean is almost impossible. Therefore workers are exposed to filth on the streets and in the slums but this is a necessary risk because genuine love and concern opens the way for the Word of God.

Possessions – At night working alone is hazardous. Even if expats are working in twos it is risky because we are considered to be rich. In poor areas workers are exposed to thieves and muggers both day and night. Life is considered to be cheap. Since street kids typically sleep during the day and are out at night that makes late night the most fruitful time for ministry among them, despite the risks.

Communication – Our attempt to be obedient to the Great Commission requires hard work: we must learn the language of street children, both their mother tongue and street slang; being controlled and motivated by God’s love, because street kids are street wise and see through a fake; learning the prevailing culture and the subculture of the kids and adapting to it. All this requires lots of time, effort and a no-quit attitude.

In summary, a worker among children-in-crisis, especially street kids, needs to be determined, ready for the long haul, motivated by God’s love, having a tough rugged faith and a genuine burden.

**ACTION Philippines’ Street Impact Team (SITeam)**

SITeam is one our team’s ministries working with children-in-crisis, particularly among older street kids and out-of-school youth. SITeam seeks to strengthen, encourage and work alongside other urban street workers in Metro Manila and other key cities of the Philippines and assist in evangelizing street children and underprivileged youth. Our vision is to ignite, encourage and strengthen Filipino churches around Metro Manila and other key cities so together we will love and present the gospel to street children and their families and see them incorporated into local fellowships.

SITeam enables missionaries to work alongside existing ministries to street children and underprivileged youth. The team seeks to implement a city-wide network of urban Christian workers to foster cooperation, communication, coordination and fellowship in specific areas of
Metro Manila as well as Metro wide and in other key cities. Because street children ministries are scattered and disjointed with small teams doing the work there is a need to develop working relationships between these groups in order to reach common goals. The desire is to see long-term coordinated ministries carried out by loving, responsive local churches to the street children that surround them. These localized ministries must be built on the conviction that small, manageable projects in which local Christians can be personally and directly involved are the most promising approach to the work. Then Christians in face-to-face relationships with street children can devise plans to implement God’s love in places where they normally live, work and worship. However, these small ministries often lack a connection to bigger more comprehensive plans with adequate resources for long-term ministry which is what SITeam offers. Our aim in mobilization is to gather together churches, agencies and individuals of common faith in Jesus Christ, like-minded in our walk with Him and with a common desire to work with others in ministering to street children, and then to encourage, equip and organize responsive local churches and agencies to the street children to develop and sustain their ministries in their areas of responsibility.

**Why This Approach to Ministry?**
We value highly the solidarity of believers as we involve ourselves in the community and on the street. We believe that by working together ministry stewardship and efficiency will improve. Working together we can sharpen each other’s skills and hold each other accountable in our walk with Christ and our ministries. Further, a support system is developed among trusted colleagues and friends helping to lessen burn-out and isolationism. Importantly, sharing of ministry information and material resources cuts down on duplication of ministry efforts in particular areas of the city.

**Common Problems Encountered**
We have seen a number of problems appear, including:

- Churches struggling financially due to economic difficulties throughout the country.
- Sudden changes of ministry priorities due to financial difficulties, leadership changes, frustration and ministering where the wind blows.
- Volunteer church workers doing too much with their limited time and energy in other church ministries thus work with street children loses out due to its demand on the workers and drain on the budget.
- The congregation is not open or ill equipped to receive street children and their families in their worship services.
- Churches lose interest because they see little immediate fruit in comparison to the time, effort and expense invested.
- Most churches are not able to provide consistent long-term care for their street children contacts such as rehabilitation, discipleship and skills training.
- Churches cannot afford even a minimal fee for attending training seminars and cannot afford ministry tools especially if they are produced abroad.
- After a time workers feel compassion fatigue or the stress of continually helping others while church leadership offers little moral support or encouragement.
- People get involved in working with street kids due to self-interests or wrong motives such as guilt alleviation, curiosity, assigned to the task or it’s a job.
Lessons Learned along the Way

- In networking have a clear purpose and objective. Do not raise unfounded expectations.
- Doctrinal differences can become a huge hindrance so we need to practice what Philip Melanchthon said long ago: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”
- Recruiting churches and agencies is difficult tedious work. To see this happen requires commitment and money.
- People start well with good intentions but fade away with a lack of clarity as to why they have abandoned their ministry commitments.
- Churches need a strong sense of ownership of their ministries which needs to start at the work’s conception.
- Confusion, frustration and weariness are part of the ministry and leadership (network and church) must be in a supportive position to help workers when they need help.
- Communicate regularly with your prayer partners and supporters so they will be up-to-date on your needs and what God is doing through you and your ministry.
- Teach, teach and teach some more through workshops and seminars along with modeling what you teach.
- Be realistic in developing plans and budgets.
- Be alert for little benchmarks or indicators of God’s involvement in the ministry.
- Stay in a continual cycle of evaluation, adjustment and learning.
- There is a need to develop simple-to-use localized training and ministry tools.
- Keep mobilizing and multiplying works and workers despite setbacks.

Ministry Activities of SITeam

Street outreach – SITeam visits street children and their families where they hang-out and live. We befriend people by attempting to build trust and learn about them while sharing Jesus Christ with them. Usually outreach locations are determined by a local church’s or agency’s request for SITeam to work with them, and various activities include singing, worship, games, Bible studies, counseling, feeding, first-aid and data gathering.

Drop-in centers – These are often located in a church that desires to be known by the children as a safe place to go. The church may provide games, showers, medical assistance, food, a safe place to sleep, laundry facilities, Bible studies, and development of case studies for referrals. The church may operate the center along with SITeam’s involvement. SITeam has signed an Agency Agreements with some of these churches in the Metro, and they include a ministry proposal budget, a job description for ACTION personnel if involved, the means of regular evaluation, and the time frame for the Agreement. The church is the lead agency, and it is responsible for the ministry.

Camping – SITeam conducts both evangelistic and discipleship camps for street children, out-of-school youth, and sidewalk families. In a typical year four camps are held, if funds are available, with up to 50 campers per camp. All campers are recruited by partner churches and agencies which also do the post-camp follow-up. Partner ministries also send workers to camp.

Evangelistic Christmas parties – Each Christmas season SITeam conducts Christmas parties in partnership with local churches and agencies for street children, slum families, and underprivileged youth in the vicinity of our partner ministry. These parties average 100 invited guests and last about three hours. They are loaded with fun, food, games, singing, skits, gifts and
the gospel. Partner ministries are responsible to secure the venue, prepare the program and food, and recruit their guests. They are also responsible to follow-up the party-goers. SITeam provides a certain amount of funding but our partner must supply the balance as needed.

Sportsfest – Street children are brought by churches and agencies to a sports facility for a day of competition, food and gospel presentation. They are divided into teams with kids from others areas and given t-shirts with their team color. They compete in athletic events such as basketball, volleyball, chess, relay races and a spelling bee. The gospel may be presented through skits, a chalk talk and songs, and as always there is lots of food.

Fish and Bread feeding – We feed malnourished children for six months in partnership with churches, agencies, the Department of Health, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the local barangay office. Monthly we receive several large boxes of food from Feed My Starving Children, which are developed for combating malnourishment. We also receive donations for Fish and Bread. When we have enough funds we will start a feeding program with food purchased at a local market.

Training materials and equipping – Equipping workers and church leaders in ministry to children-in-crisis is a priority, and we do this as requested. The goal is to help brethren start and maintain their ministry in their context using their resources.

Disaster relief and development – It is in our DNA to assist people suffering due to fire, flood, earthquake, volcano and other types of disaster. We distribute basic relief to disaster victims through churches and community leaders in the disaster zone. At times ministries in our network will supply manpower and material resources which enhances our partnership and sense of compassion when tragedy hits.

Ministry materials development – Evangelistic tracts and comic books are developed and made available to partner ministries.

**Evaluation of Our Ministry**

For an extended period of time our network partners evaluated our joint ministry and services in our respective areas around Metro Manila and other key cities such as Cagayan De Oro and Legazpi. After evaluating the data we saw where we are strong and where we are weak. We discovered that the following were weak areas that needed addressing if we were to provide fuller ministry for older street kids and their families: education for those who want to study but do not fit the formal classroom setting; provision of basic livelihood skills training for boys and girls who desire to earn an income immediately; processing of children before they are referred to a center, return to school or are reconciled with their family.

We called a strategic planning meeting of key leaders in each city network to study the data and findings together and develop a strategy of established ministries creating space in their centers to address the three identified weaknesses. The centers will receive kids from partner ministries who will share in the upkeep of their referrals and maintain their responsibility for them. As a result we helped start these four city-wide ministries in 2007:

- Children’s Garden is already an established ministry providing livelihood and discipleship training for boys along with Bible studies. They are committed to receiving referrals.
- Papa John Center is committed to opening up space for ten girls to learn basic computer skills, cooking, sewing and cosmetology along with Bible studies.
• **Restorers of the Walls** is a processing center for up to 20 boys who are in transition from the streets to their next step in life. Currently Restorers is closed due to low funding.

• **Support a Child, Save a Future** is a non-formal basic literacy ministry using the Department of Education’s Alternative Learning System and is based in various churches and agencies. When a learner graduates he/she will receive a diploma and may continue their education if desired.

SITeam is a key member of the network and assists the city-wide ministries but does not own them. The ministries are responsible for themselves. However, we do have Agency Agreements with a few select ministries for the purpose of channeling designated gifts to them.

**Creating Synergy in Ministry among Street Children**

The local church, the physical expression of Jesus Christ on earth, is the best place for followers of Christ to grow in the grace and knowledge of their Savior. All disciples of Jesus need to be identified with a Christ-exulting, Bible-saturated loving fellowship, and this includes street kids who are scar-faced, hardcore, street-wise and misfits who have repented of their sin and trusted Christ as Savior. They are now new creatures in Christ and our brothers and sisters in our common faith in Jesus. SITeam has targeted these kids because very few churches and agencies are willing to work with them. Most people prefer to work with babies or younger children because they are adoptable and easier to mold and train. It is our conviction that even the most unlovely tough street guy or gal is still reconcilable to God, their family and community but the centerpiece of this long process is the local church.

It is a long way from the life and culture of the streets or slums (not in physical distance) to the life and culture of the church. Anybody, even hard-core street children, can be spiritually joined to Christ and His church by trusting Christ, but to be physically joined is another matter. Street kids not only need to be taught about their new life in Christ, but they must learn how to behave, dress and participate in a local assembly. Church people also need to be taught how to receive street kids into their midst. Oftentimes a worker from a para-church ministry will lead a child and possibly his entire family to faith in Christ and then look for a church to which to refer these new brethren. However, the church may not be open to receive them due to fear, distrust or a church calendar full with activities. Another scenario is a church worker has an outreach to street kids in the vicinity of the church and wants to bring them into the fellowship, but the congregation is not open to receive them for multiple reasons. Simply, they are ill equipped to understand and get to know street children. Even though people from both worlds, the street and the church, have a common faith in Christ they are unable to relate to each other due to their uncommon sub-cultures.

God the Father does welcome hardcore street children fully into the local expression of the family of faith, but it is easier said than done. In order for this to happen ministries at all levels of the process need to work together. Synergy among ministries needs to be created and maintained through joint prayer, planning, implementation of action plans, hard work, and faith. Synergy means the combined action or interaction of agencies, agents or conditions such that the total effort is greater than the sum of the individual parts. In ACTION’s Principles and Practices Manual, we have synergy created by partnership and networking as a core value. It states:
“Christ’s fellowship with the Father sets the model for working unity among God’s people. The task of world evangelism and good deeds is too great to tackle individually. Therefore, operationally we commit ourselves prayerfully to relationships, partnerships, and networks in ministry. As we partner with churches and other organizations, with Christ as our Head and Center, a synergy is produced by the Spirit, which makes ministry more productive. ACTION believes dynamic networking is founded upon prayer, research and planning. It is to be done before full implementation of the ministries.” The Trinity is our Model for cooperative ministry.

**Conclusion**

Our life in Christ in not a private life. We came to Christ individually, but we live our lives in Him corporately, and this includes street children who trust Christ. When a street child turns from his/her sin to the Savior he/she is a new creature but he/she has a lot to overcome by God’s grace. Ideally this is to be done within a loving, welcoming, nurturing, and teaching congregation of followers of Christ.

However, the reality is different from the ideal. The world of a street child is foreign to the average believer in a typical church, and church culture is like another planet to street child. The fact remains though that the street child who trusts Christ is a brother/sister of other believers regardless of their status in life. People of a local church that has an outreach to street kids need to be taught from the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit needs to do a deep work of grace in their hearts so they will be able to fully accept their new brethren into their fellowship. The street child who enters the church must also be teachable and willing to change his/her attitudes, language and behavior. Changes can happen on both sides if people will submit to the Lordship of Christ and obey His Word.

Oftentimes it takes a catalyst to ignite and inflame this revival of faith. We have seen this take place but we want to see it more often. But to see more of this move of the Spirit will require faith, obedience, prayer, confession of sin, forgiveness, time, and funds. Working alongside and sometimes through local churches is slow but in the long view the only way to build lasting ministry that can minister the gospel and compassionate care to the millions of children-in-crisis in our countries, cities and neighborhoods. Missionaries and para-church organizations, even the multi-national ones, come and go, but the church of Jesus Christ will remain until “He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day.” (2 Thessalonians 1:10) when “the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven” (2 Thessalonians 1:7).

**References Cited**


