

Forum: Human Rights Council (HRC)

Issue: Measures to protect the human rights of street children in urban areas

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Introduction

Street children are the ones who rely on, live in, or have strong connections to streets and public spaces on a daily basis. In urban areas, violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, financial abuse, environmental hazards, unsafe living conditions, can threaten the child's safety out in the streets. While limited access to healthcare, education, sanitation and they don't have birth registrations or identity documents are also potential harm to their wellbeing. Responses, such as Senegal's Retrait Programme, to these issues focused solely on removing children from public spaces, but it did not cover the need to address the circumstances that led them to this situation and also restrict their long-term welfare. An effective urban response should therefore ensure prevention and immediate protection with accessible essential supports and individualised pathways towards a safe and sustainable reintegration.

Definition of Key Terms

Children in street situations

Children for whom they have strong connections to public spaces including the streets that have become central to their everyday lives and/or identities.

Child exploitation

The use of a child for the benefits of another individual or group in a way that harms and even threatens the child's rights and wellbeing. In street street situations, this may include economic or sexual exploitation, forced begging, labour and exploitation in criminal activities.

Child trafficking

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation. Specified "means" or reason is not required when the person being trafficked is under the 18, unlike the trafficking that involves adults.

Background Information

Causes and Pathways into Street Situations

Factors such as poverty, housing insecurity, family violence, or lack of access to education and social protection are circumstances that lead a child to enter a street situation. Economic hardship that might be caused by their families, could then further undermine their households or also increase children's vulnerability through conflict, disaster, or climate-related forced displacements. If the family fails to provide enough care, access to healthcare, enough education, the knowledge the children receive are limited. With a family that cannot provide sufficient support, children won't be able to have the ability to face society. As there is no single pathway that causes children into a street situation, effective responses should not assume that poverty, homelessness, or family separation is the sole cause, they must identify each child's circumstances individually and find a suitable solution to resolve their issue.

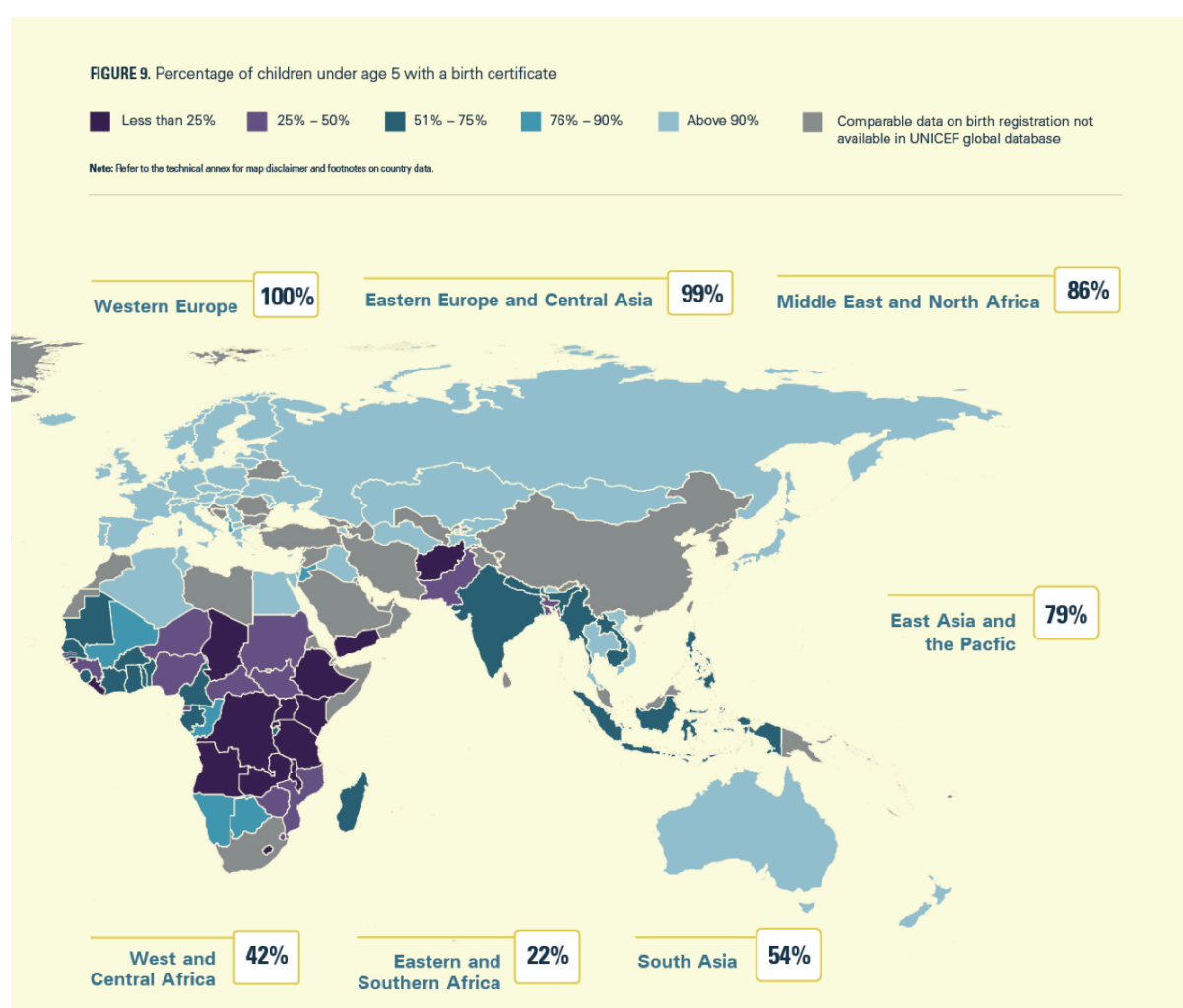


Figure 1. Percentage of children under 5 with a birth certificate, by region and country. Source: UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) *Birth Registration for Every Child by 2030*.

Threats to Safety, Health and Development

Children in street situations face multiple interconnected threats to their safety,

health, and development. Poverty, homelessness, insufficient protection can increase their exposure to violence, sexual and economic exploitation, and trafficking, while climate change and environmental degradation may further worsen these risks. Furthermore, street environments also put them into complete exposure to pollution, traffic accidents, infectious disease, unsafe water resources, and insufficient sanitation.

Barriers to Rights and Essential Services

As mentioned, factors that force children into street situations include poverty and also displacement, therefore children in street situations might not be able to receive education, healthcare, housing, social protection, and justice due to discrimination, unstable residence, or lack of legal identity documents. Missing birth registration or identification makes it difficult for them to have access to public services. These barriers can reinforce children's dependence on street environments and make them especially vulnerable to any external threats. Urban response should therefore ensure that essential protection and services remain accessible even when a child lacks documentation, permanent address, or parental support.

Inadequate and Harmful Institutional Responses

Children living in the street face criminalisation, police harassment, arbitrary detention, forced removal, or inappropriate institutionalisation rather than protection. Such actions will continue to push them towards the marginalised rather than resolving the root causes of their situation. If we prioritise cleaning public spaces, it may push children further away from healthcare, education, and social services, making them even harder to be included in the protection systems. At the same time, removing the street children from the streets is not always the best and safest solution. Family reunification may also be unsafe when violence, neglect, or exploitation contributed to the child's situation. Therefore effective intervention should consider the child's situation rather than automatically assume removal and return is for their greater goods.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

Mexico

Mexico appears to have the need for coordinated urban and national child-protection systems. In 2024, the Committee on the Rights of the Child called for a comprehensive protection system, both federal and state, for children in street situations and regular studies of their scale and identifying the root causes. The committee focuses on the removal of the root causes of children in street situations, and makes sure that the solutions for the children are feasible and effective.

Nigeria

Nigeria was proactive in solving such issues. Nigeria demonstrates how educational exclusion, poverty, and economic exploitation can increase children's involvement in street life. UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) reports that more than eleven million Nigerian children are out of school; many of them may be depending on, or be forced into, street begging for survival. Girls also faced problems including poverty, early marriage and restricted societal roles and norms. Recent responses have combined education with longer-term social protection, where UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)-supported Digital Villages have provided digital literacy, vocational training, and safe learning spaces to more than 80,000 marginalised children and adolescents, while the UNICEF-ILO-EU SUSI (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund-International Labor Organization-European Union Sustainable Social Protection Systems in Nigeria) project works towards the goal to strengthen social registers, legal frameworks, and social-protection systems at federal and state level.

Iran

Iran emphasizes risk associated with child labour, migration, and exploitation. UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) reports that children in street situations in Iran face violence, sexual exploitation, and restricted healthcare access.

UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)

UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) works with governments and also cooperate with local organizations to ensure child protection, education, healthcare, and social protection for vulnerable children including those in street situations. Its programmes may include aspects of outreach, family support, access to services, and prevention of exploitation.

OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) supports the international human-right framework protecting children in street situations through mechanisms such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child and UN (United Nations) Special Rapporteurs. Its work addresses issues of discrimination, sexual exploitation, access to justice, and barriers to essential services, while promoting right-based alternatives to criminalisation and harmful removal practices.

Possible Solutions

Urban authorities should adopt integrated child-protection strategies that combine prevention, immediate assistance, and long-term reintegration. Active outreach teams and low-barrier shelters can ensure children have the access to food, sanitation, healthcare, psychosocial support and protection without requiring a permanent address or identification documents. Governments should expand free birth registration and late-registration procedures while ensuring that undocumented children receive the services that they should have got.

Protection systems should strengthen the identification and referral of children facing sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced begging or labour, alongside specialized training for police, healthcare, including support for pregnant adolescents, should be accessible and confidential. The 2025 UN (United Nation) Special Rapporteur report similarly calls for removing legal and structural barriers to healthcare, education, housing, legal identity, and justice for children in street situations.

Authorities should avoid criminalising or unlawfully detaining children because of their social status. Long-term interventions should use individual case management, safe family reunification where appropriate, alternative care, education, vocational pathways. Children living in street situations should be able to have a say when designing policies that directly affect them, supported by ethical and separated data collection to improve services and accountability.

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