Street youth in southern Africa

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Introduction

The street youth phenomenon is global. The concepts ‘street youth’ and ‘street child’ are now commonly used in Africa; in Europe, North America, and Australia terms such as ‘homeless’ or ‘runaways’ are used to describe street youth. For southern Africa the number of youth on the street began escalating from the 1970s. Today street youth are a very familiar part of urban areas. Many do not have readily available addresses and fear the authorities, which makes it difficult to estimate their exact numbers. Who are street youth? What problems are there in studying them? What are their characteristics? How do street youth in southern Africa differ from those in other parts of the world? What problems do they face? What responsibilities does society have towards street youth? These and similar questions are examined in this article. The aim is to systematically identify and describe contributions social scientists have made to our understanding of street youth in southern Africa. The article points to problems of defining and doing research on street youth, and to areas in which there are differences of viewpoint. Understanding the phenomenon of street youth is needed for designing and fine tuning policy and programmes towards them.

Definition of youth and street children/youth

It is not easy to define the concept of youth. In general the period between childhood and adulthood is called youth, but what this period actually covers varies from society to society depending on the diversity of roles, social change, and the complexity of the society in question. On this basis Hurrelman (1989) argued that a real definition of youth should not have fixed age limits. It is a phase of life in its own right with experiences that are a product of a society’s culture. This phase is necessary for personal formation and societal placement.

Most southern African countries follow the definition of the United Nations organisation and the Commonwealth Secretariat in fixing age limits. Youth is often seen as falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years, although individual countries vary the limits. Thus Botswana and Zambia include people up to 30 years, while Swaziland includes those up to 35. Other countries include 12-year-olds.

Whatever the definition of youth a country adopts, the majority of people living in southern Africa today fall into this category. Population pyramids in the southern African region have a broad base indicating a high birth rate and a...
concentration of the population in the lower age groups. These pyramids also have narrow peaks indicating high death rates and low life expectancy.

Youth is usually seen as a time when individuals prepare for adult life. In particular the school-to-work transition is the dominant youth issue in almost all countries. In many places a job is considered a necessary part of the adult status. In southern Africa, however, there are serious deficits in the school and employment systems. Although many countries have done a lot to improve formal education they cannot cope with the rapidly increasing number of people of school age. According to UNESCO’s World Education Report (UNESCO, 1998), net enrolment ratios in southern Africa are low. Net enrolment ratio is the enrolment for the age group that corresponds to the official school age of people at a certain stage of education. This ratio in secondary schools ranged from Botswana 45% (42% males and 48% females); Zambia 16% (19% males and 14% females); and Mozambique 6% (7% males and 5% females).

In Zambia only 25% of those who graduate from primary school register for secondary schools. Even fewer make it to tertiary institutions. The situation of females in education is worse. Unemployment figures in southern Africa are also high because of structural adjustment programmes, insufficient educational opportunities, and the impact of globalisation on labour. Most youth do not have jobs because they are the last to be hired (since many do not have the required educational qualifications) and the first to be fired (since their experience on the job is low). The unemployment rate among young people is two to ten times as high as among older workers. In Namibia the overall unemployment rate is 34.8%. The rate for people between 15 and 19 years old is 61.7% compared to 54% for the 20–24 age group, 31% for the 30–34 age group and 19.8% for the 45–49 year age group (Government of the Republic Namibia, 1998). The consequences of low educational and employment opportunities for young people cannot be underestimated. They fail to act as channels for social mobility. These two factors are important as background to the phenomenon of street youth.

Street youth are a special kind of youth. They range in age from approximately 5 to 20 years. According to Le Roux and Smith (1998a) the term is used for young people who spend time on streets but who may or may not share other characteristics. Street youth are a diverse group. They may go to school, may have experienced trouble with authority and may be boys or girls. Most definitions of street youth share three elements: spending significant amounts of time on the street; making the street into a way of life; and inadequate protection, supervision, and/or care from a responsible adult. In southern Africa many of the street youth are young people engaging in legal or illegal economic activity in the public arena. The street refers to places such as bus stops, outside of shops, minor and major roads of given towns, parking lots, and other public places where youth attempt to make a living. Annew (1996) therefore says that the street has different meanings in different contexts. For some it is a place for socialisation, for others a place for traffic.

UNICEF suggests that a distinction should be made between types of youth found in the street depending on their relationship to responsible adults providing a home base (Annew 1996, le Roux and Smith 1998a). UNICEF distinguished between ‘youth on the street’, ‘youth of the street’ and ‘abandoned youth’. Youth on the street are seen as youth involved in economic activity such as begging, carrying bags for people who have been shopping, cleaning cars, and vending commodities. They are working on the street and very visible. They are said to have a home base to which they go and contribute economically. They have a sense of belonging to a family or household and may even attend school. Youth of the street are a few steps further from home. Their ties to households and families are occasional and at best tenuous. Many of them are trying to have a life outside their homes or away from a responsible adult. For them the street is the significant point of reference in their situational existence. According to Annew (1996) some segments of youth on the street are further distinguished as abandoned youth. These have little or no contact with relatives and have little interest in being under adult supervision in a home. They have broken with conventional society being committed towards surviving on the street. Since they have no intention of leaving
the street, they may even adopt a ‘street identity’. Annew (1996) contended that this operational definition of street youth is a categorisation that originated from observations by Latin American programme workers.

This definitely does not suit African conditions. Africa has a greater diversity of language and culture than Latin America. Using this conception of street youth in Africa is akin to imposing assumptions from a distinct environment and imputing a false cultural homogeneity on Africa. Moreover, as Apteker and Abebe (1997) pointed out, the dichotomy of youth on the street and youth of the street is misleading because the two groups are not very distinct. They do not have different personality characteristics. Some of these youth alternate styles: there are periods when they live on the street with little or no family contact and periods when they are at home. In southern Africa the majority of the street youth are economically engaged on the public terrain. There is evidence in the African context that the differences between youth of and on the street are due to the circumstances that they face (Apteker and Abebe 1997). For example, refugees from war may appear as youth of the street, but once their situation improves they may stop living on the street.

This definition of street youth also presupposes a certain conception of childhood and family life that may be at variance with what happens in reality. The notion that a young person’s place is in the home is strong in middle-class Africa since the family is seen as a central building block of a viable social order. Adults (parents) are perceived to have great responsibility towards the young. In particular males (fathers) go out searching for jobs that enable families to survive. Females remain at home performing expressive functions such as care. The young are more or less passive recipients of adult services and good will. Such a family may be exploitative of females and may put too much pressure on males. Some researchers also say that it has never really existed and anthropological evidence from Mozambique shows that children have always been active and resilient as contributors to family welfare. They are compared to ‘banana trees’ that no longer need the shade after a few years and put out new shoots after a fire. Young ones seem to derive considerable self-esteem from their working activities.

Problems of studying street youth in southern Africa

Donald and Swart-Kruger (1994) have pointed out that it is quite difficult to collect reliable data on street youth in southern Africa because they have a life style that is evasive, fluid, and unpredictable. Since most studies interview street youth themselves, they rely on self-reports. These are unreliable. Cockburn (1991) argues that ‘street work’ requires taking opportunities and some degree of evasion and deceit. ‘Presenting information about themselves is part of their survival skills which rests on their ability to manipulate their audiences’ (Apteker 1994, 199). This is necessary to persuade members of the public to part with their money. These skills are also needed to survive in situations that are dominated by antagonistic adults. Inevitably, self-reports on age, suffering, family situation (including relationships with kin), etc. have little reliability. One way of dealing with this situation is to collect longitudinal data or to use participatory observation. Yet many surveys are cross-sectional.

Any social survey must attend to problems of sampling to ensure adequacy in empirical research. Unfortunately in many African countries appropriate sampling frames are hard to come by. For street youth they cannot even be constructed because of too many suspicions. It is also difficult to construct sampling frames because street youth move around and it is hard to keep track of them over time. This means that most surveys on street youth use non-probability samples such as network (snowball) samples. Regular surveys assume that the population being sampled is infinite. That cannot be assumed in network sampling. Neither can the population involved be stratified or randomised. Yet most researchers on street youth use snowball samples as if they were regular samples.

Street youth in southern Africa: a portrait

The diversity of street youth extends beyond the activities that they engage in and the way
they are classified, to how the phenomenon is manifested in different countries and cultures. All studies report that street youth are mostly male. Boys outnumber girls on the street in Swaziland (Maphalala, 1996). Very few young girls are seen on the streets of Harare, Zimbabwe (Dube et al. 1996). In Botswana, 90% are boys (Campbell and Ntsabane 1997). According to Tacon’s (1991) survey about 80.6% of the street children in Namibia were male. Some studies in Zambia report that up to 90% of the youth on the streets are boys although in some other studies the figures range from 63% to 78% depending on the town (Phiri 1996). Part of the reason why males predominate is because females are needed in the family to do household chores such as child-minding and domestic work (Rose-Junius 1993). ‘Even poor families are afraid to let their daughters go out into the streets’ (Dube et al. 1996, 260). According to Dube et al. (1996) there are also a lot of people who will give girls a home (and therefore remove them from the street) in order to exploit them.

Individuals on the street are a combination of children and youth. Sometimes children as young as five are working on the streets, but they can be in their early 20s. Due to chronic malnutrition, they often appear younger (Le Roux and Smith 1998a). For Zambia, Phiri (1996) claimed that the majority fall between 8 and 14 years. In Namibia, Tacon found that they ranged between 5 and 24 years. Dube et al. (1996) found that street youth in Zimbabwe ranged between 12 and the early 20s. The figure for Swaziland was 7 to 20 years old, although almost half of them were between 13 and 15 years of age (Maphalala 1996). Older youth are not on the street, because they cannot earn a living this way. ‘Street work’ requires manipulating members of the public to part with their money. This includes appearing miserable, stories of hardship, demeanours that reflect suffering and making appropriate impressions. These are more believable when done by younger individuals. Older youths are more likely to be seen as challenging the conventionality of the public place, if not as criminals.

Overwhelmingly, street youth have a home base and are on the street to earn money. Many of them are victims of poverty and come from a low social economic background. In Zimbabwe, Muchini and Nyandiya-Bundy (1991) found that 85% of street youth lived in a family at least some of the time. About 58% of them came from parents who were unemployed. For Botswana, Campbell and Ntsabane (1997) found that only 7.6% of the boys slept on the street. Similarly, the Swaziland study found that only 28% of the youths included in the sample slept/lived on the street (Maphalala 1996). Almost 67% of the Swaziland youths indicated that they were on the streets because of economic difficulties. For South Africa, Donald and Swart-Kruger (1994) claimed that about 90% of the youths working on the streets return to their homes at night. Tacon’s (1991) survey for Namibian towns found that most street youths had families. Only 2% of them slept on the street. Most came from female-headed households that were characterised by poverty and larger family sizes (averaging 10 members). According to Tacon, these were families whose make-up put them more at risk to the vagaries of the economy than ‘regular nuclear’ families. For them to survive required that all but the very youngest members of the family had to work. Most of these youth were on the street to earn a living. Most of this money was spent on food for themselves and the family. Tacon and Lungwangwa (1991) reported that about 41% of the street children in Zambia gave their earnings to their parents and/or guardians (again illustrating their family connections).

Although studies by Tacon in both Namibia and Zambia and Cockburn (1991) for South Africa claim that street youth are likely to come from single parent, female-headed and even abusive households, it is difficult to trust this claim. These studies have not included control groups. Without such a control group researchers cannot really tell whether people are in the street because they are coming from such homes, or because of some other feature of the social environment. The same is true of claims that blame parents and step-parents for pushing youths into the streets. The fact is that few studies in southern Africa have studied the families of those on the street, but instead focus on the youths themselves. Campbell and Ntsabane’s study in Botswana utilised control groups. It found no significant differences in the family situations of street boys and non-street boys from low family incomes.
There are differences between countries. In Namibia and South Africa the issue of race is important. The overwhelming majority of street youth are black. This does not mean that there are no white youth in difficult circumstances but the state has catered (or used to cater) for them differently. ‘There are virtually no white street children in South Africa, but there are 10,000 white children in 160 state registered and subsidised children’s homes. In contrast, there are no state administered children’s homes for African children in the urban areas’ (Ross 1991, 70). More urbanised countries have more street youths. There are also differences in the levels of violence that street youth are subjected to in the different countries.

Causes of the phenomenon of street youth

Researchers seem to agree that there are a number of factors that account for the rise in the number of street youth in southern Africa (Apteker 1994, Le Roux and Smith 1998a). The main factors are highlighted in this section.

Economic restructuring

There has been a restructuring of society and economy since the 1970s when southern African countries started experiencing economic problems. By the 1980s southern African countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, and later Zimbabwe and Lesotho had entered a prolonged economic crisis. So had the war-torn countries of Angola and Mozambique. Apart from Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, they were all forced to submit to structural adjustment programmes (SAP) promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. SAP has promoted neo-liberal state systems characterised by reliance on the market for allocating resources and wealth. The role of the state is underplayed. This adjustment elevated profit making, devalued trade unions, and promoted greater integration into the world markets. The effects of these economic policies on social welfare have been far-reaching, including cuts in health, education, and food subsidies. Poverty has led poor families to depend on working or self-supporting (street) youth. Most street youth are on the street because of poverty (Apteker 1994). Being on the street is a public disclosure of destitution. It is a statement to both the public and the individual concerned that one is poor.

Changes in family structures

Factors associated with modernisation have led to changes in family structure (and increased family discord). Modernisation refers to a process of urbanised societal change in which countries develop and use advanced industrial technology. More controversially, modernisation is also associated with neo-liberal politics, nuclear family systems and the adoption of other alleged features of western culture. Increases in street youth reflect problems that people experience due to social stress associated with industrialisation and urbanisation (Le Roux and Smith, 1998a).

It is alleged that modernisation brings with it new values and forms of social control. These exist side by side with traditional ones. Modernisation especially affects three social institutions: family structure, educational expectations and authority systems. It is argued that, over time, the importance of the family in production and socialisation tends to diminish. The traditional family was extended in the sense of being a network of relationships that linked people to relatives outside the immediate (nuclear) family. Traditional families are said to extend beyond the nuclear circle to include non-blood relatives and generations of relatives. In traditional families (which are said to exist in varying degrees in the rural areas of southern Africa) the family is the unit of production. Many of these families are organised around ‘family land’ on which women, men, and children have different tasks. Parents, elders and other relatives share in the socialisation of children. If a man was not able to take care of all his children, his extended family fostered his children and took care of his wives (Apteker 1994). This was rooted in kinship structures and traditions. Younger people were sent out to kin not only when their natural parents failed to care for them (as in divorces, teenage mothers, and economic inability) but also when they were able to do so. Children were seen as

Children playing on a scrapheap, Oshakati, Namibia. Chris Steele Parkins / Magnum
Street youth in southern Africa

belonging not only to natural parents but also to the extended family. Fostering of young people among non-relatives was very rare.

With modernisation and the introduction of the wage labour system, things changed. Many, especially men, are increasingly employed outside the home and are usually the only ones contributing to the family’s finances. With social change and the tendency towards nuclear families, fostering of the young among kin is declining. Achievement orientations and greater individualism are introduced in the family. There is a general decline in the centrality of kinship as an institution for organising social bonds and relationships. Furthermore, the elders do not control the economic situation of family members and the authority structure no longer favours the elderly. Single parenthood is on the increase. Migration from rural to urban areas has removed many people from traditional social sanctions. One result is that vertical and horizontal ties between kin are loosened as people try to divest themselves of their extended family obligations. ‘Children no longer grow up in extended families with strong community support’ (Apteker 1994). The newer family forms are less efficient in providing for large numbers of youngsters and do not readily accommodate distant relatives. They tend towards being ‘nuclear’. In this situation young people in circumstances of family crisis cannot be accommodated by kinship structures, and may end up on the street. With modernisation some of the young people are not prepared to adhere to parental rules and discipline. Thus these children may be expelled into the streets.

HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS has also taken its toll in southern Africa. Increasingly its younger victims are joining the streets. In the last few years southern Africa has become the major epidemiological locus of AIDS. Sero-prevalence rates range around 20% of the general population. According to UNAIDS, in 1998, in southern Africa 1.4 million people aged 15 to 49 were infected with the virus that causes AIDS (UNAIDS 1998). Three-quarters of a million of these cases were in South Africa alone. In Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe between 20 and 26% of the 15–49 years old age group were infected. In some towns the rates are in excess of 30%. Mortality rates due to HIV related diseases are expanding. According to UNAIDS (1998), two million people died of AIDS in Africa south of the Sahara. The most productive age group (20 to 49 years old) is inordinately affected. Survivors tend to be the elderly and young orphans. UNAIDS (1998) estimates that by the year 2000 Zimbabwe will be burying 350 people a day due to AIDS. By the year 2005 there will also be about 900,000 orphans under the age of 15 who will be struggling to survive without their parents. The figures for the other countries in southern Africa are similar. The morbidity and mortality of those in the 20–49 years old age group leaves many of their children without support. Illness and eventual death of parents translate into a lack of capacity to generate income and provide basic needs, such as shelter, food, and clothes. Many of the children involved cannot go to school. Parental illness and eventual death is also traumatic to the young. These children and youth are primary candidates for street life.

War

In Angola and Mozambique war is a factor in youth joining the street. For Mozambique, Loforte concluded that ‘the majority of the children [and youth] whom we find in the street are, first and foremost, a consequence of the war being waged against this country and the accompanying political, military, economic, and social destabilisation’ (quoted in Annew 1996, 208). Many young war refugees who crowd into capital cities can only make a living on the streets.

In South Africa and Namibia, apartheid was important in causing youth to be in the street. In practice apartheid meant forced relocation of families, a migratory labour system, and unemployment among non-whites. In the 1970s this led to strife and warfare that involved youth. It resulted in nomadic street existence and youth crowding in central city areas (Cockburn 1988, quoted in Rose-Junius 1993, 91).

The important thing to stress is that these are macro-level factors that set the stage for the street youth phenomenon, acting as necessary, but not always sufficient, conditions for the
phenomenon. Not all youth affected by these factors (modernisation, political factors, poverty, etc.) become street youth. Even from the same family certain young people end up on the street while others do not. It is difficult to disentangle cause and effect in individual vulnerability to the streets, although to explain it we must look at social action or inaction that individuals are involved in. Apteker (1994) has talked of the need to look at the psychological status of the individual and family concerned, their perception of life on the street and the acceptability of being on the street in a given culture. Certainly, being on the street may have a lot to do with accumulation of personal troubles (e.g., soured relationships at home, beatings, re-marriage of a parent, death of significant ones, hunger, etc.) which combine to drive somebody into a given action. It is important to acknowledge that the immediate reason why an individual is on the street varies from one young person to another. Young people do not become street youth overnight. It seems a street youth career develops in phases. Progression from one phase to another is not automatic but rather depends on the individual’s situation and personality and the reactions other people have towards him or her. When individuals start on this career they are unsure of what they are doing. They may be disoriented and frightened. As a result they leave home for a day or so but gradually spend more time on the street (Apteker 1994). A street career may end at this point if the experiences are too negative, if the young person finds a job or friends and relatives help. The second phase involves straddling between the street and home. At this point the street is not so strange or threatening. Young people at this stage spend more and more time on the street although they keep their ties to families. Only a few gravitate towards complete abandonment.

Problems of street youth

Public perceptions and reactions towards street youth

Studies in southern Africa report that members of the public have negative perceptions of street youth. The press conveys a ‘bad boy’ image of them. They are seen as responsible for making the streets dirty. This image is made worse by the fact that some street youths pester the public by begging, asking to polish their shoes, to look after their cars, etc. Their image is not helped by the fact that some are used by adults in activities that are judged as immoral while others ‘portray an image of being tough in a bid to avoid exploitation and abuse’ (Dube et al. 1996, 264). For the public, street youths are an impersonal aggregate rather than individuals. Consequently, the public misunderstands them (Le Roux and Smith 1998c).

Public negativity towards street youth is sometimes translated into violence. Williams (1996) has detailed such cases in southern Africa. He cites cases of shop keepers in South Africa using boiling water and raw-hide whips to keep them away; cases of drivers passing by spraying bullets on them and cases of street youth dying in arson. According to Rajani and Kudrati (cited in Williams 1996) street youth fear violence against them most in Tanzania.

Police brutality against street youth is not unusual though it does not approach levels reported in Latin America. For Zambia, Phiri (1996) reported harassment by police and detention of youths for days in police cells without charge. In Zimbabwe police are concerned about the city’s image and routinely round up street youth (Dube et al. 1996). Allegations of police brutality in South Africa include ‘being kicked, tear-gassed, set upon by police dogs, thrown into lakes even though they cannot swim, and being forced to drink alcohol or smoke glue and then beaten for drunkenness’ (Le Roux and Smith 1998c, 902).

Health

According to Rose-Junius (1993) concern with the health of street youth has been due to three factors. First, is their exposure to the elements, accidents and risks while on the street. Second, the difficulties that they face in accessing medical services including their inability to pay for such services, and lastly, their lack of motivation to use and ignorance of existing medical facilities. Malnutrition may also be a factor, although some studies report that street youth are better fed than their siblings living with
adults. Dube (1997) looked at institutional data for six clinical sessions involving 66 Zimbabwe street children. She found that 42% had chest and urinary tract infections, 14.5% had Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), 10.5% had skin problems, 9% injuries due to violence and another 9.2% had ear, nose, and throat infections. The rest had unspecified ailments. Many of these diseases are due to unhygienic conditions on the street.

Everywhere HIV/AIDS inordinately affects youth, and street youth are more affected than others. According to Swart-Kruger and Richter (1996) this is because they think they are invulnerable, are sexually active earlier and have more partners. Street youth are sexually exploited, engage in survival (or transactional) sex and rarely use condoms. STDs and pregnancy for them are higher than among other youth. Overall, street youth knowledge of AIDS leaves much to be desired. In their South African sample Swart-Kruger and Richter (1996) found that two-thirds of those surveyed believed they could visually identify HIV carriers. Dube (1997) confirmed this for Zimbabwe and found that street youth believed traditional cures would treat the disease.

**Psychological situation**

There are many indications that street youths are mentally sound. Many of them take the decision to leave home rationally. They do so gradually rather than abruptly. They appreciate the fact that there are negative feelings from the public and authorities towards them. Consequently, they are suspicious of strangers. They do not readily give out information to researchers for fear it might be used against them. Their views and aspirations are conventional. They believe in families and staying away from crime and aspire to such jobs as mechanic, electrician, and driver (Bar-on 1997). Almost every study reports that they value their independence and freedom. The study in Zimbabwe reports that some street youth may make more money than domestic workers and unskilled workers (Dube et al. 1996) and can earn one to one and a half times the average minimum wage of adults (Bar-on 1997).

On the negative side some studies report that street youth easily lose track of time and distance, and wander aimlessly. Some researchers have reported low self-esteem, apathy, and fatalism among street youth. For South Africa, the longer one was on the street the more likely one would have psychopathological symptoms and an external locus of control (Le Roux and Smith 1998a).

**Deviance**

By the standards of society, street youth contravene norms and values (Le Roux and Smith 1998b). Consequently many people see them as deviants engaged in substance abuse. There is some evidence for that. Rose-Junius (1993) found that among the high earning activities street youth in Namibia engaged in were stealing and sex. Inhalation of glue, petrol, etc. in order to escape the realities of the street is widespread (Le Roux and Smith 1998a). ‘There can be little disagreement that street children are sometimes perpetrators of violence’ (Williams 1996, 227). In Botswana, there were significant differences between street boys and non-street boys in terms of glue sniffing, cigarette smoking, and alcohol consumption (Campbell and Ntabane 1997). By definition the street is an informal sector, that is not legal in many places. However, the deviance picture is a bit more complicated. Much of the violence by street youth may be in self-defence and their involvement in substance abuse may be no worse than other youth. In Botswana, 75% of the street youth were found to be criminally ‘clean’ (Baron 1997). In Namibia two out of five boys were arrested at some time but 80% were released, while in Zambia no street boy was ever brought to court (Tacon 1991).

**Policy reactions to street youth phenomena**

There are several reasons why distinct policy on street youth is necessary in southern Africa. First, the growing number of street youth is such that authorities believe there is a need for organised responses to lessen their numbers. For those in authority there is also a need to ‘rehabilitate and re-integrate’ street youth into
wider society. Many street youth are stigmatised, seen as delinquent, and discriminated against. This undermines their basic human rights. Policies are necessary to safeguard rights as a moral obligation and as part of the strategy to ‘re-integrate’ them. Finally, in so far as the street youth phenomenon reflects shortcomings in education and employment systems of the various countries, policy is needed to address the situation.

Policy and programmes on street youth reflect the two dimensions of coercion/compassion and righteousness/practicality. The first continuum reflects a tendency that emphasises compulsion in dealing with street youth as against understanding their needs. The practicality/rightness continuum reflects the moral position that being in the street is wrong for youth as against what is pragmatic. Four policy approaches can be identified from these that are not mutually exclusive but used in combination in different countries. First is containment of street youths through a mixture of force and practical incentives. An example of this is the rounding up and releasing of street youths in Zambia and Zimbabwe. These actions label street youth as delinquent.

Second, is punishing street youth to discourage potential street youths. Assassinations of street youth in places such as Brazil reflect this position. So does police brutality in southern Africa. Punishment infringes the rights of street youth and many people do not support it as a viable way to deal with the issue.

Third, is integrating youth into families and society through education and income generation schemes. For example, Namibia created a street children division in the Ministry of Local Government and Housing. By 1992 this division’s efforts had resulted in the placement of 53 street youths into nine different schools. There were setbacks though. Three of the reintegrated girls got pregnant while seven of the boys dropped out. While the government defined the problem of street youth as one of education and therefore placement into schools the youths themselves saw things differently. Most street youth wanted jobs and/or training leading to jobs. In many countries income-generating schemes have been tried. Examples include the Boys Brigade in Botswana, the Work Camps Association in Swaziland and the Domestic Development Service in Zambia. These are adult designed programmes that assume what young people want. They have been shunned by most street youths as of marginal relevance. These are also expensive programmes to run.

The last approach is promoting actions that are humane and practical such as distribution of food and shelter to street youths. This has been the preserve of Non-Governmental Organisations such as SOS and UNICEF. For instance SOS provides homes in small, family type groups where 10–12 young people live in each house under the care of an adult. Education, health care, and recreation are provided to them. These centres exist in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. These fail to provide for the freedom that most street youth want. Since they are expensive, they can only cater for small groups. Williams (1996) contends that many African institutions for children have records of abuse, are overcrowded, understaffed, and underpaid.

**Conclusion**

The number of youth on the street in southern Africa is bound to escalate. This is because the conditions which have in the past given rise to the phenomenon continue unabated. In particular, the economic crisis will continue and more and more people will find themselves in poverty. The AIDS crisis that has inordinately affected the region also does not show signs of slowing down. Despite the negative attitudes towards street youth from the authorities and the general public, street youth cannot be wished away. Neither can they be ignored. Up to the present, efforts to address the street youth phenomenon have been uncoordinated and there is a need for an integrated approach. This must involve a number of sectors in society working together. Research in southern Africa suggests that there is a need to know more about the families of street youth, and the role that rural-to-urban migration plays in causing the phenomenon. There is also a need to know the various ways street youth differ from each other. Knowledge in these areas may help in fine tuning policy and programmes towards street youth.
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