Social Support and the Ability to Adapt to Life Among Brazilian Street Children and Non–Street Children

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THE PROBLEM OF STREET CHILDREN has become increasingly apparent in countries throughout the world, especially in large cities (Blanc, 1994; Rizzini & Lusk, 1995). Whereas some street children maintain contact with their families and are in street settings to make money to contribute to their households, others are full-time residents of the streets and neighborhood shelters, having little or no contact with their families (Aptekar, 1994; Connolly, 1990; Rizzini & Lusk). Molnar, Rath, and Klein (1990) found that children living on the street were at risk for developmental difficulties far greater than those of the average child. According to Maslow (1968, 1970), children are not likely to grow and move forward until their basic needs have been satisfied. If a child is hungry, no other interest exists but obtaining food. Current research does not provide a clear picture of street children, their social supports, and their abilities to survive on the streets.

We obtained a convenience sample of 30 male street children and 30 male non–street children (age range = 13–18 years, M = 15.6, SD = 3.9) from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The street children, both those who had little contact with their families and those who engaged in street work to supplement family income, were residents of the street environment or were living in shelters. We drew the comparison group of children from local schools. The first author conducted identical interviews with both groups of children in the winter of 1996. The children were told that the purpose of the study was to learn about their eating habits, needs for shelter, and social supports.

We used two measures: the Ability to Adapt to Life on the Streets Scale (AALS), developed for the present study, and the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ, Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987). The AALS had three sections: (a) the ability to obtain

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food, (b) the ability to find shelter, and (c) the ability to grow normally. We developed the AALS to assess (a) the child’s daily food intake as recommended in the Food Guide Pyramid (US Department of Agriculture, 1992), (b) the number of days (0–7) in a typical week that the child was able to find shelter, and (c) how safe he felt in the shelter (1 = not safe, 5 = very safe). We assessed the ability to grow normally by measuring the child’s height and weight and computing his body mass index (BMI, weight [kg]/height [m²]). We compared each child’s BMI with the Brazilian national standards for his age. The SSQ yields scores for the total number of supportive persons in the child’s life and the quality of those supports.

We selected the present sample of street children from different facilities that provided some kind of assistance in terms of food, shelter, or baths. The first author saw each child individually in a private area of the shelter and administered the separate measures to him. We selected the non-street children from private and public schools, and the first author administered the measures individually in their respective schools.

We performed an analysis of variance to examine the differences between the street children and non-street children across the variables of ability to thrive on the street and social support. We found that the street children had less contact with their families, especially with female adults, than did the non-street children, F(1, 58) = 56.67, p < 0.001. The street children also reported fewer supportive persons in their lives than did the non-street children, F(1, 58) = 24.25, p < 0.001. Finally, the street children had lower BMI scores (M = 19.54, SD = 2.46) than did the non-street children (M = 21.19, SD = 3.17), F(1, 58) = 5.06, p < 0.028. Although we found no differences between the two groups in the ability to obtain food, the street children had less access to dairy products, p < 0.02, than did the non-street children.

The results of the present study support those of previous research (e.g., Campos et al., 1994, Connolly, 1990, Rizzini & Lusk, 1995). The street children had fewer social supports and less stable adult role models than did the non-street children. In addition, the street children were developmentally behind their peers with regard to body mass and physical growth indices. The foregoing findings support the prevalent notion (e.g., Koegel, Burnam, & Farr, 1990) that street children lack adequate nutrition in early childhood and that the deficiency manifests itself fully in adolescence.

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Received June 9, 1998
Accepted July 12, 1999