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"There is Always Violence": An Exploratory Study of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Street-Involved Children

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Abstract

As the economic center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh has long been a hotspot for street-involved children and families. While violence is a common facet of life on the street, risk and vulnerability among children is notoriously difficult to measure. Most large-scale surveys tend to sample children within homes and schools, which overlook street-involved children who are commonly unregistered, irregularly attend school, and live outside of houses. This research paper is one of a series of studies on such groups in Southeast Asia. The study conducted 94 semi-structured interviews with street-involved children eight to 18 years of age in Phnom Penh. Physical violence is indicated by the vast majority (77%) of respondents, with significant rates of violence from parents and teachers. Sexual violence is also common, reported by one-in-four (25%), and nearly twice as prevalent among males. As an exploratory study, this research aims to provide a resource for local practitioners and policymakers, and to inform future research.

Keywords

Cambodia, children, youth, physical violence, street children, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, child abuse, child labor exploitation

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"THERE IS ALWAYS VIOLENCE": AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA, STREET-INVOLVED CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

As the economic center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh has long been a hotspot for street-involved children and families. While violence is a common facet of life on the street, risk and vulnerability among children is notoriously difficult to measure. Most large-scale surveys tend to sample children within homes and schools, which overlook street-involved children who are commonly unregistered, irregularly attend school, and live outside of houses. This research paper is one of a series of studies on such groups in Southeast Asia. The study conducted 94 semi-structured interviews with street-involved children eight to 18 years of age in Phnom Penh. Physical violence is indicated by the vast majority (77%) of respondents, with significant rates of violence from parents and teachers. Sexual violence is also common, reported by one-in-four (25%), and nearly twice as prevalent among males. As an exploratory study, this research aims to provide a resource for local practitioners and policymakers, and to inform future research.

KEYWORDS

Cambodia, children, youth, physical violence, sexual violence, street children, child sexual exploitation, child labor exploitation

DESPITE THE DIVERSITY OF BACKGROUNDS, experiences, and means of survival among street children in Cambodia, violence is often a consistent and persistent theme that weaves throughout their wide-ranging narratives. While street-children are not a new phenomenon in Phnom Penh, the recent influx of foreign investment and the rapid increase in tourism has made Phnom Penh a renewed hotspot for street-involved families, many of whom migrate from poorer provincial areas in search of income (ECPAT International, 2017). As researchers have become increasingly aware of children's vulnerability to violence and exploitation in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) region, there has been two studies (Miles & Thomas, 2007; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2014) exploring children's experiences of violence within homes and schools. However, large-scale prevalence/household studies, such as the United National International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Violence Against Children (VAC) Cambodian survey, commonly overlook children who

do not attend schools, those who are unregistered, or those who do not live in houses, leaving critical gaps in fundamental data on the nature and scope of childhood violence. Thus, this paper serves as a means of filling these gaps, by reflecting findings from a community-based study conducted with the help of local Cambodian social service providers, working with street-involved children in Phnom Penh.

UNICEF understands a "street child" as

> [a]ny girl or boy...for whom the street, in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, and so on, has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected... by responsible adults.

To dispel common reductive understandings of street-involvement, UNICEF defines three broad categories of street-children: (1) children of the street; (2) children on the street and (3) children from street families. A "child of the streets" is one who has no home and lives on the street and without a family. A "child on the streets" is one who spends the majority of their time on the street due to poverty, overcrowding, or abuse at home, but may return to a family at night. A child who is "part of a street family" is a child who either lives or works on the streets but does so to help their family. Generally, fewer children are considered as children "of the street," and it is suggested by Woan et al. (2013) that those who are "on the street" often age out of this classification and often become children "of the street." While the authors of this study acknowledge these careful distinctions, this project has opted to use the terms "street-involvement" or "street-connectedness" in order to better include the diverse range of experiences among children living and working on the streets.

Street-involved children are commonly visible within public places such as market squares, streets, and sports fields. These can be the places where they work, spend their time, or sleep (Woan, et al., 2013). Qualitative and quantitative studies in various countries uncovered a diversity of factors that contribute to street-involvement in high-, low-, and middle-income countries (Embleton, et al., 2013). A study by Human Rights Watch (2006) on street-involved children in Hanoi, Vietnam, found that many children from rural areas with and without their parents move to Hanoi to find work. Similar results for street children worldwide were found in Sauvé's (2003) study. These attempts are not always successful, and whole families end up on the streets trying to earn a living with informal jobs.

Children are forced to earn a living within this context through begging and informal work and are often found left without parental supervision or support (Sauvé, 2003), which is often strenuous with little compensation (Amon, 2013). Children and young people are vulnerable to deaths due to accidents, violence, or suicide, most of which are not investigated by police (Amon, 2013; Jones, et al., 2007; Sauvé, 2003). Groups such as these also commonly fall victim to "clean-up operations" by the police or city governments that want to clean the streets of street-involved groups (Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman, 1998). After detention, street-involved children may be taken to prisons/facilities where further abuse is often experienced (Amon, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2006; Thomas de Benítez, 2007). Lack of adequate legislation or enforcement of existing laws by the police and the authorities often leaves children in these contexts, unable to defend themselves. Weak political structures (Among, 2013; Sauvé, 2003) complicate the development of legislation for their protection. Corruption among civil servants also prevents helpful structures from being established (Amon, 2013).

Children and adolescents exposed to these difficulties often suffer from difficult health conditions in the form of mental illness, infections, reproductive health and growth challenges, and early mortality (Woan et al., 2013). Suicide assumes a special role here. Jones, et al. (2007) explicitly investigated the causes and frequency of suicide among street children and found that a significant proportion of street-involved children are at risk of taking their own lives for lack of perspective (Jones et al., 2007).

Multiple studies on children's experiences show that physical violence and sexual abuse are common issues faced among street-involved children, often perpetrated by peers, law enforcement, caretakers, and other adults (Amon, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2006; Sauvé, 2003; Thomas de Benítez, 2007). While males and females both demonstrate significant vulnerability to sexual violence, research on the topic commonly overlooks the needs and vulnerabilities of boys and young men, and the concept of "victim" remains largely feminine (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). The focus on girls and women as the "weaker sex" often masks the vulnerability of boys due, among other things, to regressive gender assumptions, which ascribe a greater degree of agency and resiliency to boys and young men, despite a wealth of evidence demonstrating their clear vulnerabilities (Chen, 2004; Cusick, et al., 2003; Melrose & Barret, 2003). This results in discourse, research, and interventions that overlook the needs and vulnerabilities of males, especially among those living and working on the streets, which may leave them with increased risk. Until recently, boys and young men were largely overlooked as target groups for sexual exploitation in literature (Davis, et al., 2016; Lillywhite & Skidmore, 2006).

Davis and Miles (2017), in a series of studies in Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines, have examined the vulnerability and experiences of young men working in massage parlors, bars and other establishments and find consistent patterns of significant vulnerability, as well as a dearth of services to meet their needs. Many of these young males had experienced sexual abuse by caretakers or parents in the domestic context, or on the street, perpetrated by local adults, as well as by foreign travelers and tourists and locals.

Alongside the vulnerability of street-involved children to physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional violence, the rapidly expanding gap between the country's rich and poor has led to increasing forms of structural violence against such groups. Structural violence, or "structural inequality," is shaped by globalization, major foreign investment, and an increase in capitalism (Galtung, 1969), which leads to a wider gap between the country's rich and poor. Poverty and lack of employment, especially in rural areas, drives migration into the country's urban centers in desperate search of opportunities. This migration, combined with neoliberal development (acceptability of new sexual norms and pornography), patriarchy, gender differences, familial obligation and fatalism creates a context in which vulnerable groups may be more inclined to fall into exploitive forms of work and held there due to a lack of social mobility (Galtung, 1969).

Street Involvement in Cambodia

While the actual number of children on the streets on Cambodia is unknown, a 2017 enumeration of street-living children (conducted 2015) estimates at least 2,700 living directly on the streets within the seven most populated urban centers of Cambodia (Stark, et al., 2017). Within this sample, boys were found to have increased vulnerabilities in several areas. For instance, boys were more likely to be involved on the streets and among children who had caregivers. While most children reported that parents were the primary care giver, 90% out of 203 girls reported living with at least

one parent compared to only 78% of the 366 boys. Further, girls on the street were found to be more likely to attend school and be able to read (Stark et al., 2017).

According to a systematic review of global literature, most formal research into this field is focused on youth in western nations (Woan, et al., 2013). In Cambodia and South-East Asia, the potential expectations for children in these contexts are expected to earn an income, often referred to as "filial piety." According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) it is believed that 19.1% of Cambodian children between the age of 5-14 years are "economically active," which includes 18.4% among boys and 19.8% of girls (ILO, 2013).

Physical Violence

Obtaining an accurate prevalence of children on the street who are abused is challenging, as most of the research is reliant on household surveys which overlook children not living in traditional homes. However, Stark et al.'s (2017) study of seven Cambodian cities found roughly 10% (60 of 549) of children said they felt unsafe where they live and an equal number claim they cannot trust their caregiver (Stark et al., 2017). In Poipet, a Cambodian border town, Davis and Miles (2017) find the majority of street-involved children, 66% (or 50) experience violence, a higher percentage of those being boys (on the border). In a separate study (Davis & Miles, 2014) in Sihanoukville, regarding street-involved children, one in four children (14) experienced physical assault within the previous 12 months.

In the UNICEF VAC study (2014) in Cambodia, most school age boys and girls reported physical violence, more than 80% of whom cite multiple incidents. Despite legal changes under Cambodian Law, which make physical violence illegal as discipline in school (UNICEF, 2014), teachers are the most common perpetrators of violence with 79% of females and 69% of males reporting such experiences. Further, a 2014 survey by Friends International of more than 700 Cambodian street-involved children found that the majority work more than six hours a day. Further, responding to questions on challenges they face in their daily lives, nearly one in four, or 23% reported various forms of violence.

Sexual Violence

In a 2014 study by Action Pour Les Enfants, involving 494 reported child victims of sexual abuse, over 60% are boys. Similarly, a large-scale UNICEF survey in homes and schools found 4.4% of girls and 5.6% of boys in a Cambodia household survey experienced sexual abuse prior to the age of 18 boys. Further, boys, on average, were younger the first time they were abused, and 90% of boys, compared to 70% girls, were victims of multiple incidents (UNICEF, 2014).

A survey of Cambodian school children from every province in Cambodia in 2004 finds 16% of children were victims of unwanted sexual touching (Miles & Thomas, 2007). Most notably, 22% of children in this study cite that they had witnessed the rape of a child by an adult. In Poipet, a 2017 study by Davis and Miles among street-involved children found 23% of children sampled had experienced unwanted sexual touching with boys four times more likely to cite such instances. Similarly, a separate study in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, conducted solely among street-working boys found 33% of respondents had experienced unwanted sexual touching (Davis & Miles, 2014).

METHODS

Sampling

This report is the result of empirical field research conducted between February and June 2018. It is part of a series of studies on the vulnerability of street-involved children in Southeast Asia. This study employs both purposive and chain-referral sampling methodologies to conduct 94 semi-structured interviews with Cambodian street-involved children (56 boys and 38 girls) aged eight-18 years in key areas where street-involved children are known to live and work in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Due to the team's extensive presence on the field, participant observation adds to and informs the data.

Before data collection, extensive fieldwork was conducted with experienced local social workers from *The Hard Places Community*. The study applies a 60:40 male-to-female ratio, which reflects the average gender ratio of street-involved children served by local social workers. Researchers conducted interviews between April and May of 2018 at varying times throughout the day and night in key locations throughout the city.

Inclusion Criteria

Children selected were "street-involved" (street-living or street-working), aged between eight and 18 years, were not living in any residential facility (government or non-government), were not benefiting from close case management from a social service provider, had no identified risk of harm by participation, were not under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and were able to freely consent to participate.

The questionnaire consisted of qualitative and quantitative questions designed to assess the experiences and potential for children on the street and as a basis for the development of suitable assistance for local NGOs. Before fieldwork, social workers and researchers identified areas within the children's environment that were comfortable and semi-private, allowing the children to talk about sensitive topics. Some interviewers had already built rapport with children due to their work in the community. As a part of this, interviewers shared snacks with respondents and took breaks to walk or play games, as needed, during interviews. After each interview, respondents were provided with a toiletry/hygiene kit as a means of thanking them for their participation.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All interviewers were practicing social workers from the local community and underwent ethical and research-focused child protection training with a licensed child trauma psychologist based on United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) Ethical Guidelines for Human Trafficking Research (2008) prior to beginning data collection. During this training, role-playing and field-testing exercises were utilized to familiarize interviewers with the research instrument, to aid them in empathizing them with the feelings of the child being interviewed, and to prepare for situations in which they would need to make service referrals.

During data collection, each interview was conducted as a dialogue between the respondent and social worker, to which each respondent gave verbal and written consent. Interviews were conducted in safe locations. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose and the nature of the questions and assured confidentiality. They were informed that their names would never be recorded on the research form and

that they would be able to stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable and could skip any question. Lastly, for respondents needing social services, legal protection, or health services either a direct referral was made, or referral information was made available. If a child was in immediate need of assistance, action was taken directly following the interview. In total, eight children were referred for services following interviews.

While the data collection team attempted to gather a sampling of respondents that reflected the diversity of children living and working on the street in Phnom Penh, field researchers were limited to interviewing only those respondents who were readily accessible in areas of data collection and those who were willing to be interviewed. The research team did not have access to some groups of children who seemed to actively avoid NGO contact. Geographic locations were limited to areas in which our implementing partner, The Hard Places Community (HPC) was working as there were "territorial" issues between NGOs, but more importantly, HPC could follow up with those who chose it. These children cannot be representative of all street-children in Phnom Penh; however, this is an intentionally diverse sampling that the researchers feel reflects a diversity of experiences among the children in the areas sampled.

About three in four children had some level of previous interaction with HPC, which could potentially have had an impact on disclosures of violence, substance use, or other sensitive issues. It should also be noted that HPC programming overwhelmingly focuses on sexual abuse and exploitation, which may reduce referrals for other issues such as drug misuse. Further, some children felt the questionnaire was too long, so some struggled to concentrate after a while. It also became clear that especially younger children felt some questions were too abstract and found them difficult to answer. This could also have some impact on the accuracy of the study's findings.

The analysis of the questionnaires utilized SPSS version 24 and the additional thematic analysis of qualitative responses utilized Google Sheets.

RESULTS

Children in this study range from eight to 18 years of age with an average age of 12.5 and the vast majority of respondents being between the ages of 10 and 15. While field observation found that the majority of street-involved children were very young (under the age of eight), however, due to the study's ethical protocol to protect children from the discussion about sex and drugs, interviews were not conducted with children under this age.

Migration

More than half of all children (48, or 51%) indicate that they were born in Phnom Penh and had not migrated. Nearly half (41, or 44%) had migrated from various Cambodian provinces. Three children (3%) said that they did not know where they were born and two (2%) provided no response. The vast majority of the 41 who had migrated (27, or 75%), came with at least one parent, four children (11%) had migrated with extended family members and two (6%) could not recall with whom they had migrated. Additionally, one child states they migrated alone, one migrated with a non-relative, and one migrated with their siblings.

Housing

The majority of children (55, or 81%) regularly sleep in some form of shelter at night. Of the 55 in this group, 20 (63%) sleep in rented spaces and six (19%) sleep in

simple homemade structures. Eleven children (16%) do not sleep in any form of shelter and usually sleep directly on the streets. Nearly half of the children (18, or 46%) describe feelings of fear or worry when they sleep at night. This is slightly more common among females (12, or 57%), in comparison to males (6, or 33%). Most children were afraid of other people on the streets, with 12, or 28%, feeling worried about being abused while asleep, nine feeling worried about being arrested by police while asleep, and seven feeling worried about being robbed. Nearly a third of children (13, or 30%) cite fears of "spirits" that may harm them while they sleep. Among the children who say they do not feel afraid, half (13, or 50%) cite this is due to having people around them, referring to friends, family, or other members of their community.

Schooling

More than one-third (36, or 38%) of children interviewed do not attend school. Among the 55 (59%) who do attend school, 43 (78%), cite attending every day, while the rest cite irregular school attendance.

Sources of income

The types of work and work hours on the streets are diverse. Among the 84 (90%) who work on the streets, 34 (40%) cite begging as their primary source of income, while more than one third, or 29 (35%) cite selling various items on the streets for income (e.g., watches, bracelets, and shoes). Sixty-seven children (87%) report giving the money they earn to family members - something which was nearly equally prevalent between males and females (38 males, or 90% and 29 females, or 83%). Six children (8%) say they use their earnings for food, two save it, one gives money to friends, and another one uses their money for school fees.

Perceived Safety Versus Arrests by Police

The majority of children, or 68 (77%), indicate that they do not feel safe working or walking around on the streets alone, with similar responses between males and females (41, or 80% of males and 27, or 73% of females). "Being arrested" (16, or 25%) and "Abuse" (16, or 25%) were the most common reasons among both genders for why they don't feel safe on the streets, followed by fears of organ trafficking and fear of drug users.

Both genders perceive boys to be most vulnerable to traffic accidents (22, or 26% in an open-ended question), followed by "abuse" (20, or 24%), being arrested (9, or 11%). To a lesser extent, children felt boys were at risk due to drug use, human trafficking, organ trafficking, and sexual abuse. Among girls, sexual abuse was the most common perceived risk (31, or 39%). Boys were more likely to consider sexual abuse to be a key risk for girls on the streets with 21, or 46% of boys, and 10, or 29% of girls, seeing this as a risk. To a lesser extent, "arrest," "traffic accidents," human trafficking, and organ trafficking, are also risks.

More than one in four children (23, or 26%) say they have been arrested by the police with similar numbers among boys and girls (13, or 25% of boys, and 10, or 27% of girls). Of those who were arrested, most of the children (13, or 65%) cite being arrested due to living or working on the streets. The remaining seven (35%) cite being arrested for a variety of different reasons. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Children's Responses to the Question: "Why were you arrested?"

Reason for Arrest	Males		Females		Total	
	n	Percent of boys providing reason for arrest	n	Percent of girls providing reason for arrest	n	Percent of children providing reason for arrest
Street involvement	8	67%	5	63%	13	65%
Unknown reason	2	15%	3	30%	5	22%
Fighting	1	8%	1	10%	2	9%
Being accused of something	1	8%	0	0%	1	4%
Being high	0	0%	1	10%	1	4%
Making noise	1	8%	0	0%	1	4%
	n	Percent of all boys	n	Percent of all girls	n	Percent of all children
Children disclosing Arrest	13	23%	10	26%	23	24%
Children not disclosing arrest	43	77%	28	74%	71	76%

Detention

In Phnom Penh, detained street children are taken to Prey Speu, a detention center north of the city. In recent years, this center has received a great deal of notoriety in the media and from a UN Special Rapporteur. The report describes a center which struggles with regular overcrowding and the often inclusion of street-involved children alongside adults. In this study, 23 children say they were arrested, among whom 13 were boys (23% of boys) and 10 were girls (26% of girls). Among the 23 who disclose a reason for their arrest, children responding to this question, 13 children (16%) said they had spent at least some time in Prey Speu: Eleven of the 13 were boys (23% of all boys); and two were girls (6% of all girls). The higher number of boys held in detention could be due to the assumption that boys are more resilient to be in such facilities.

Among the 13 who describe detention at Prey Speu, five experienced of abuse: One female describes sexual abuse, two males describe physical abuse (being kicked, beaten), one female describes general physical abuse, and one male simply states "abuse."

Nearly half of those taken to Prey Speu (six, or 46%) said their detention lasted between three to six months, two between one week to one month, and three less than a week. Two said they were detained for more than six months with one staying for more than one year.

Emotional Violence

The majority of children (67, or 74%) say people on the streets curse or yell at them. Of the people who yell or curse at children on the streets, (24, or 38%) are strangers (12, or 19%) cite "other kids" and (nine, or 14%) indicate "other street-sellers," and 14 (22%) cite family members (see table 2).

Table 2: Children's Responses to the Question: "Who curses or yells at you?" (able to respond more than once)

Persons	Males		Females		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Strangers on the street	17	46%	7	26%	24	38%
Family members	3	8%	11	41%	14	22%
Other Kids	6	16%	6	22%	12	19%
Other Sellers	7	19%	2	7%	9	14%
Other	4	11%	1	4%	5	8%

Nearly one-in-three (26, or 29%) indicate that people on the streets intimidate them or make them afraid. While similar rates are indicated among males (15, or 29%) and females (11, or 29%) girls are more likely to be intimidated by people in their families (reported by five of 12 girls in comparison to one of 15 of boys). Boys are more likely to be intimidated by strangers and people on the street (13, or 87% versus five, or 42%, among girls). In spite of this, nearly half of street-involved children (35, or 46%) indicate most adults on the streets have a "positive" reaction toward them. Nearly one-in-three (18, or 24%) say most adults have a "negative" reaction to them, and 23, or 30%, suggested a neutral reaction from adults. (see table 3).

Table 3: Children's Responses to the Question: "Who intimidates you or makes you feel afraid?" (able to respond more than once)

Persons	Males		Females		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Strangers on the street	13	24%	5	2%	18	67%
Family members	1	2%	5	2%	6	22%
Other Kids	1	2%	2	8%	3	11%

The majority of children (73, or 80%) indicate being cursed or yelled at by people within their homes. Nearly half of children, or 33 (46%), say that this is due to the parenting style of their mother or father, 24 (33%) say that this is due to various conflicts with their siblings, seven (10%) say that the verbal violence is related to their work on the streets, and five (7%) say that they don't understand why they are cursed or yelled at when they are at home.

Slightly more than half of children (51, or 55%) say they feel loved or comfortable around people within their families—this was slightly more common among males (33, or 60%) in comparison to females (18, or 49%). Nearly a third (29, or 32%) say that they "sometimes" feel loved or comfortable in their families, and 12 (13%) say that they do not feel loved or comfortable in their families. Thirty-three children (36%) say they feel that they have people in their lives that they can trust; 16 (18%) say they sometimes feeling there are people they can trust, and the most substantial portion, or 42 (46%), say that they do not have people in their lives that they feel they can trust.

At the time of interview nearly one-third (29, or 32%) of children felt down, depressed or hopeless—a feeling which was more common among males (22, or 40%) in comparison with females (seven, or 19%). When they feel upset, the majority of children (52, or 68%) say "spending time with their friends" is something that makes them feel better, and seven (9%) say "spending time with their families" makes them feel better, and two children said "working" makes them feel better. Lastly, six (8%) respondents say that they do not know what makes them feel better, and 10 (13%) chose not to respond to this question. Well over half of the children (55 or 59%) indicate that they have someone whom they can go to when they feel sad or depressed although 38 children (41%) were unable to name a person that they go to when they feel upset, among those who responded, 26 (48%) said they turn to friends when they feel sad or upset, and only 18 (19%) turn to members of their immediate family.

Physical and Sexual Violence

Physical violence was a common reality for the majority of street-involved children with 70 children (77%) citing some form of violence from people on the street, including being beaten, kicked, slapped, choked, burned. While the majority of children, or 40 (63%) say that this only happens 'every once in a while', eight (13%), say that they experience this 'almost every day'. In addition, 11 (17%) say they experienced violence like this 'a few times a week' and five (8%) say violence 'a few times a month'.

Physical violence is most commonly described as coming from parents and care givers (73, or 78%), followed by teachers (59, or 63%), peers (41, or 33%), and gangsters or *bong thom* (23, or 24%). Further, 52 children (59%) describe instances on the street where they were afraid that someone was going to kill or severely injure them, and 33 children (39%) say an instance in which they sustained injuries from the violence they experienced.

One in four, or 22 children (25%), say they were sexually touched by adults on the genitals. This was nearly twice as common among males (15, or 30%) in comparison to females (7, or 18%). When asked about personal experiences of being touched, four children declined to respond—all of whom were male. Among those who disclosed sexual touching, the majority (20, or 73%) said this happened in places on the streets where they work, five said it happened near their home, and two said it happened in a pagoda (where some boys sleep at night).

When asked if an adult had gone beyond sexual touching, twelve children (eight males and four females) described oral sex, anal sex, and sex with other children. Further, four boys and six girls said they were physically forced to do something sexual and nine children said they were filmed by adults while they were naked. Four children declined to respond to this question. Lastly, 17 (22%) indicate experiences such as these situations were still happening to them, and one child declined to respond.

All of these children were provided or offered direct support services, following the interviews.

DISCUSSION

Experiences of Violence

While various forms of violence are evident both within the home and on the streets, a significant portion of violence—particularly sexual violence—seems to be perpetrated by adults on the streets within the areas that the children live and work. This seems to indicate a significant need for increased awareness and vigilance among parents and care givers, as well as among the general public, to identify and mitigate risks for children living and working on the streets. The ChildSafe Movement is one initiative working throughout large cities in Cambodia that attempts to provide this level of vigilance, however, data in this study seem to indicate a potential need for the reinvigoration of these initiatives, both from the ChildSafe Movement and other invested child-protection partners.

Physical and Sexual Violence

The majority (70, or 77%) of the children describe physical violence as a common experience during their time on the streets, with eight children saying this happens almost every day. This is the highest rate of overall physical violence reported throughout the four studies on street-involved children that the authors have conducted throughout the region, including a study on street-involved children in Poipet, a city on the Thai-Cambodian border known for a wide range of violence, where 66% of respondents reported various forms of physical violence in previous research (Davis & Miles, 2017). It is notable that among the children in Phnom Penh who disclose the various perpetrators of violence, parents and teachers are said to abuse children most frequently with nearly two in three children (59, or 63%) citing violence from teachers and almost four in five (73 or 78%) citing violence from parents or guardians. Overall disclosures of physical violence are notably higher than previously researched locations: 11% higher than in Poipet, 16% higher than in Chiang Mai, and 22% higher than in Sihanoukville. While elevated violence from parents is seen throughout previous studies on street-involved children, it is particularly elevated in Phnom Penh, surpassing even the overall violence reported to be experienced on the street.

One in four Children (22, or 25%) describe instances in which adults had touched them sexually in the genital area. Most instances of sexual touching take place on the street, perpetrated by people in the areas they live and work. While nearly all respondents disclose where the touching took place, nearly half (47%) decline to indicate the perpetrators of sexual violence. While it is not certain why such a high number of respondents declined to identify perpetrators, it is possible that many respondents feared repercussions for disclosing such details even though they were informed that the survey was confidential. Forms of sexual violence disclosed by children include adults exposing themselves, forced sexual touching, and penetrative sex. Among children who disclose being shown pornographic materials by adults, the majority say that these adults were Khmer strangers who they met on the streets. Throughout all questions on sexual violence, all those who declined to respond were male, many of whom indicate high levels of emotional violence in their homes and communities.

Table 4: Physical Violence Across Studies in this series by Davis & Miles in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)*

Study Location	Phnom Penh		Poipet		Sihanoukville		Chiang Mai	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Overall Physical Violence	70	77%	36	66%	42	55%	35	61%
From parents	73	78%	20	25%	31	61%	12	22%
From teachers	59	63%	**	**	7	18%	5	95%
From peers	41	33%	21	27%	16	37%	16	29%
From police	9	10%	14	18%	5	13%	3	5%

*Sexual violence among street-involved children in Phnom Penh, compared with similar findings from the three previous GMS studies in this series by Davis and Miles (Davis & Miles, 2014; Davis, Fiss, & Miles, 2016; Davis & Miles, 2017).

** Values for teachers were not assessed in the study conducted in Poipet, Cambodia.

Rates of sexual violence in this study are similar to those found in Poipet and somewhat lower than the rates found in Sihanoukville and Chiang Mai. Rates of sexual violence in Phnom Penh is nearly twice as common among males with 15, or 30% of males citing such instances, and seven, or 18% of females. This is consistent with all previous research on street-involved children in this series. In Poipet, males were found to be nearly four times more likely to cite sexual violence than females, 1.3 times more likely than females in Sihanoukville, and 1.8 times more likely than females in Chiang Mai. These findings are in contrast to commonly held assumptions about gender and sexual violence and suggest a need for deeper, qualitative research on the lived experiences of young males in high-risk areas, including the child-protective capacities within local communities, and the various local assumptions about agency and resilience pertaining to young males.

Gender & Violence

Violence

While both males and females indicate substantial violence connected to their street-involvement, some clear differences between the genders are notable. While girls report slightly higher rates of physical violence than boys (32, or 82% among girls and 39, or 74%, among boys), sexual violence is markedly higher among males. This finding is consistent with findings in our three previous studies on street-involved children within the region. Nearly one-in-three males in Phnom Penh (15, or 30%) cite some form of sexual touching from adults prior to the age of 18. While many factors may contribute to higher rates of sexual violence among males, a key factor may be the common presumption that male are less vulnerable and more capable of taking care of themselves, which may result in less vigilance from adults. Throughout this series, boys have overall been given more autonomy on the streets in comparison to girls and are afforded less vigilance from adults within their communities. When working, they commonly work on their own or with peers, while females more commonly work under adult supervision.

Table 5: Sexual Violence Across Studies in this series by Davis and Miles in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)*

Study Location	Phnom Penh		Poipet		Sihanoukville		Chiang Mai	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Males	15	30%	14	27%	25	39%	15	54%
Females	7	18%	2	8%	11	25%	7	28%
Total	22	25%	18**	23%	36	33%	24**	44%

*Sexual violence among street-involved children in Phnom Penh, compared with similar findings from the three previous GMS studies in this series by Davis and Miles (Davis & Miles, 2014; Davis & Miles, 2016; Davis, Fiss, & Miles, 2017).

** The 'total' figure in this study includes two respondents who identify as transgender.

Throughout interviews, both males and females perceive boys to be notably less at-risk on the streets, in comparison to girls, despite the fact that the experiences described by the boys indicate the opposite. Males in this study are more than 1.5 times more likely than girl to perceive sexual abuse as a key risk for girls (see table 4). even though boys are much more likely to cite experiencing sexual violence themselves (see table 4). Considering the biggest risks for boys, both male and female respondents were roughly in agreement on key risks faced by boys, which were: traffic accidents, physical abuse, and getting arrested by police (see table 6a).

Other key gender differences are the reported options for, and responses to, males who are feeling vulnerable or upset. Boys are significantly less likely to cite having someone to go to when they feel angry or upset. Given the rates of sexual violence disclosed, this could have severe implications for the social and emotional health of boys growing up on the streets. There is a distinct need for the development of safe and trusting relationships for both males and females—particularly among those who have experienced, or are at risk of, violence.

A further observation in the data is that boys are more likely than girls to decline to respond to questions on sexual violence. This could indicate some respondents who have perhaps experienced sexual violence but are not comfortable to disclose. Numerous studies have documented significant barriers to male disclosure of sexual violence. This includes personal barriers (not labeling sexual violence as an abusive experience), interpersonal barriers (fear of shame or isolation), as well as sociocultural barriers, resulting from the cultural expectation of masculinity to be strong and not be vulnerable to sexual violence (Hohendorff, et al., 2017).

Table 6a: "What Are the Biggest Risks for Boys on the Streets?"

Gender	Among Males		Among Females		Total	
	n	Percent of group	n	Percent of group	n	%
"Traffic accidents are the biggest risk for boys"	15	29%	9	26%	24	28%
"Abuse (in general) is the biggest risk for boys?"	10	20%	5	15%	15	18%
"Getting Arrested is the biggest risk for boys"	10	20%	4	12%	14	16%
"Physical abuse is the biggest risk for boys"	7	14%	3	9%	10	12%

Table 6b: "What are the Biggest Risks for Girls on the Streets?"

Gender	Among Males		Among Females		Total	
	n	Percent of group	n	Percent of group	n	%
"Sexual abuse is the biggest risk for girls"	23	48%	15	43%	38	45%
"Abuse (in general) is the biggest risk for girls"	3	6%	6	17%	9	11%
"Getting arrested is the biggest risk for girls"	3	6%	3	9%	6	7%
"Traffic accidents are the biggest risk for girls"	4	4%	11	12%	6	7%

Encounters with Law Enforcement

The boys and girls involved in the street communities are often detained for reasons related to their street-involvement. Most commonly, children cite arrest for sleeping on the street (4), followed by begging or selling (3), and just being on the street (3). Children that have been taken to the detention center describe crowding, neglect, fear, and abuse while detained. All previously detained children spent less than one year in detention, with the majority spending 0-6 months. Children, in 39% of scenarios, leave the detention center through help from a local NGO arranging for their release. In other scenarios, children exited detention through a variety of means including running away, being released due to a parent's death, and a parent arranging for their release.

Children in Phnom Penh describe violent encounters with law enforcement at similar rates as previous studies in the region. While nine children in Phnom Penh describe physical violence from police, 13 (16%) of children in Poipet, 3 (6%) in Chiang Mai, and 5 (13%) in Sihanoukville disclose the same. Notably, however, in Phnom Penh, the majority of children, or seven out of nine, are 13 years or younger. Children in this younger group cite various, specific forms of physical violence, including one who was slapped and another who cites being hit with a stick. Children in Phnom Penh describe law enforcement as a significant risk while working on the street, a risk second only to being hit by motor vehicles. These findings indicate a greater need for police accountability and training in the universal rights of children—which are extended to children regardless of socio-economic status or whether or not they are working on the streets.

Shelter on the Streets

Violence is a common experience both for children sleeping on the streets, as well as those who live in homes, however, there are notable differences in the types of violence that the two groups experience. While children sleeping on the streets are at greater risk of physical violence from police and other youth, children living in homes indicate higher vulnerability to sexual violence, however, it is not clear if the violence is perpetrated by persons within the home. Nineteen, or 19.7%, of respondents cite that they live on the street. Children who cite living in homes or some form of shelter (i.e. not sleeping directly on the street) are much more likely to indicate living with a parent or guardian in comparison to children who sleep on the streets (49, or 83, in comparison to 13, or 68%). Further, children who sleep on the street indicate a greater awareness of other children who are either physically or sexually abused, however they are less likely to indicate personal experiences of sexual or physical abuse in comparison to those living in homes (12, or 63%, in comparison to 50, or 85%). Children sleeping on the street, however, are notably more likely to cite being beaten by police, in comparison to those in homes (26% in comparison to 5%). Similarly, more than a third (36%) of children sleeping on the street cite physical abuse from other youth (bong thom), in comparison to 18% among those living in homes.

Further, respondents taking shelter on the street were nearly twice as likely to cite feeling afraid in the places where they slept, as compared to children who do not take shelter on the street (13, or 69% and 21, or 35%, respectively). Similarly, when asked about the good things of living on the street, five of those living on the street (26%) cite there are good things, whereas 28 (47%) of non-street-living children do not see any good things about being on the street. Both boys and girls who are not on the street have a perception that there are more freedom and economic opportunities living on the street, despite the findings of this research, which indicate they are more often victims of equal or higher rates of abuse.

Children who live on the street are at an increased risk of arrest in comparison with those who live in homes (13, or 68%, in comparison to eight, or 13%). While both those who sleep in the street and those in buildings describe witnessing sexual abuse of other minors at similar rates (seven, or 36% and 18, or 31%). However, children who shelter on the street are at a higher risk of more and ongoing abuse. When asked about being "more than touched", "forced sexually", and if the abuse is "still going on", street-living children answered at a higher rate than children not living on the street. Further, children who sleep on the streets are more likely to indicate ongoing physical and sexual abuse.

Children who sleep on the streets indicate school attendance at a much lower rate, five (26%), in contrast to 40 (67%) of non-street sleeping children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Violence among street-involved children in Phnom Penh is a common occurrence for both boys and girls. However, data in this study indicate unique and pressing vulnerabilities for boys and young men, which seem to be exacerbated by gendered assumptions of resilience and a greater level of autonomy afforded to them by parents and care givers. Further, the research finds significantly increased vulnerability to sexual violence, despite a common perception that this is not something that boys face. Boys are significantly more likely to disclose experiences of sexual violence yet are much less likely to be seen by girls and boys as vulnerable to such violence. We found notable violence from parents and teachers in this study– significantly more than found in previous research in urban areas within the subregion.

Parenting and Schools

Social programming of local government and NGOs should place a special focus on violence within the family and community—looking at unhelpful parenting practices, positive discipline rather than corporal punishment, and challenging the various stigmas faced by street-involved groups within schools from teachers.

Non-Governmental Organizations

During the initial presentation of these findings, it became clear that many NGOs were unaware of what resources existed throughout the NGO community, which risked creating gaps and overlaps in much-needed services for children. Dialogue with the NGO community also uncovered what seemed to be an "expertise bias" in which some long-standing organizations who have developed many key programs appeared to stop learning and asking questions about the continuing efficacy of their interventions. This can lead to significant gaps between programming and the expressed needs of children. For some, there seems to be a feeling that "they" are the only ones who are able to provide services for a particular need, which may lead toward territorialism between organizations and lack of collaboration. Therefore, there is a need for clear and accessible referral options and pathways between organizations to support street-involved or high-risk children groups.

Law Enforcement Engagement

Police should be provided with training in trauma to better inform their encounters with street-involved children, many of whom have experienced substance misuse issues, sexual exploitation and abuse. Minimizing the harm and fear of the encounters between street-involved children and police should be prioritized. NGOs and MoSAVY should continue advocating for the rights of the child to be upheld in all law enforcement encounters and continue to build positive partnerships with police.

School Support

More alternatives from the "normal" schools should be provided for children of the street so they can catch up grades they have missed and then opportunities should be provided for these children to re-integrate in the school system. Teachers should be supported to undertake child protection training specifically in the context of appropriate classroom discipline and positive engagement with at-risk/high-risk

children, rather than physical punishment (particularly threats of violence against the child if they are absent from school). Teachers should also be provided with training in regard to referral pathways for children needing additional support.

Professional development opportunities and specialized training should be provided to MoSAVY staff, NGO, health and social workers on the impact of online sexual exploitation, sexual abuse of boys and girls and the impact of substance/alcohol misuse in youth.

Future Research

Future research should place a greater focus on potential helping relationships for street-involved children including rather than putting aside boys, who are often overlooked as vulnerable persons. Future research and social programming should focus more closely on the relationships and lived-experiences of street-involved children, rather than simply focusing on economic development and access to education. While both of these issues are important, real development on these issues may be unsuccessful if children are not able to achieve social or emotional stability within their communities.

Research exploring the length of time that children and families are experiencing street involvement in Phnom Penh should be undertaken. This would be helpful in understanding if most experiences of street involvement are over short, extended or sporadic periods of time and consequently whether they are more at risk of abuse and exploitation if they are on the streets for a longer time.

Research exploring the experiences of children and adults who have previously experienced street involvement would help provide a deeper understanding of what risk and resilience factors contributed to their street involvement and what interventions/ supports were the most beneficial in changing their experience.

CONCLUSION

While girls have long been viewed as victims, boys are victimized as well (UNICEF, 2013). Despite their vulnerabilities, there is presently a dearth of services that are sensitive to the unique needs of male survivors of violence - especially sexual violence. In view of this, it is crucial that NGOs, religious organizations, and government groups adopt a holistic and balanced understanding of human vulnerability: that children - including boys and men - are whole persons, with unique sets of vulnerabilities and resiliencies. This should include an understanding of the gendered assumptions that societies hold for boys and young men, and a keen awareness of their impacts on identification of victims and access to services.

Violence against boys is common and pronounced yet seems to be largely ignored by those who should be protecting them as a key issue that they face. There needs to be greater emphasis by service providers on the vulnerabilities of boys to all forms of violence, especially sexual violence.

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