

How many children are

growing up on the

streets of Jinja,

Uganda?

An Executive Summary of a research report
by S.A.L.V.E. International



Introduction

Background

The world has been facing a time of great change and challenges in recent years. The Covid-19 pandemic led to widespread disruptions and lockdowns to try to reduce the impact of the disease. This meant that many children were out of school and struggled to access education if they did not have the tools or systems that allowed them to study from home.

Just as things were beginning to return to some sort of normal, the global cost of living crisis hit. This has pushed many people across the world deeper into poverty due to spiraling costs of essential items such as food, fuel and soap. The full extent of this economic crisis is not yet known.

Uganda was also affected by an Ebola outbreak in 2022 which led to further localised lockdowns and school closures to try to combat the disease. This outbreak was contained, but created further worry and stress for families who were not sure what the future would bring.

S.A.L.V.E. International is an NGO based in Jinja Cit in Eastern Uganda. S.A.L.V.E. works in a variety of ways to reduce the number of children having to live on the streets of Uganda, which all have education at the heart of them.



Street Life

Growing up on the streets is dangerous. Children are at high risk of emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse as they spend their time working and sleeping on the streets. These events can lead to long-term trauma and psychological damage. Many of the children become addicted to taking drugs to help them cope with their difficult lives.

Whilst on the streets, children regularly suffer from health problems such as wounds from the activities they carry out to survive, for example going through the rubbish for sellable items like plastic bottles and scrap metal. They are also at high risk of catching diseases such as malaria and typhoid as they are not able to take preventative actions such as sleeping under mosquito nets or drinking clean water.

Children are out of school and missing out on the opportunities that education brings to allow them to have a career and secure future. They don't have a safe place to sleep without fear of harm or adults who are caring for them.

There are many reasons why children run to the streets. The most common reasons mentioned by the hundreds of children that S.A.L.V.E. has supported to leave the streets since 2008 are linked to extreme poverty and hunger at home or family breakdown. Children might also turn to the streets due to peer influence or to try to earn money to sustain themselves, or to pay for their own school fees and requirements. Sometimes they come as refugees trying to escape war or persecution. Some children also come to the streets due to domestic violence and child torture and abuse at home.

Executive Summary

Whatever the reason for a child running away to the streets, it needs to be addressed for them to be able to settle home well again, or an alternative safe home and family found for the child to stay with. This is the work that S.A.L.V.E. International does, based in Jinja City but working across Uganda to ensure that there is “No Street Called Home”.

The last **head counting research** that was carried out in Jinja, Eastern Uganda, took place in 2017, before the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis began. S.A.L.V.E. International and the local Government in Jinja City and District noted that the number of children on the streets seemed to have increased but did not have clear data as to how much by, and thus decided it was important to try to find out.

S.A.L.V.E. carried out this research to better understand the current scale of the problem so that we can try to develop, in partnership with others, more solutions to help ensure that these children can safely leave the streets and have a brighter future.

The head counting research estimated that a staggering **11,516** children were living and working on the streets of Jinja at the start of 2023. This is a **192%** increase on the figures from 2017 (3,943).

11,516 street connected children in Jinja in 2023

192% increase since 2017

Gender of children on the streets

Our research found that 68% of the children on the streets were boys (7,831) and 32% were girls (3,685).



Where do street connected children sleep?

This research found that 14% of children were **sleeping openly on the streets** (1,612). 75% of these children were boys and 25% were girls.

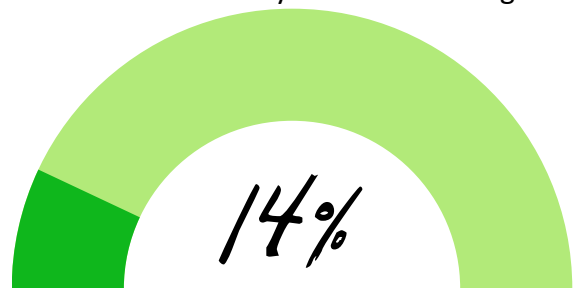


Figure 1: Children sleeping openly on the streets

16% of children were staying in **child headed households** (1,843). These are cheap and often insecure houses that children rent together in a group so that they don't have to sleep openly on the streets. This allows them to more easily hide the fact they are street connected. 67% of the children staying in child headed households were boys and 33% were girls.

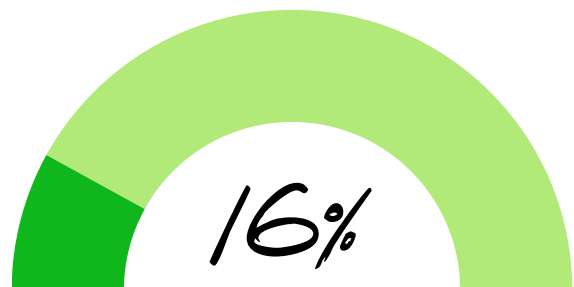


Figure 2: Children sleeping in child headed households

Additionally, 1% of the children were **staying with an organisation** that was helping them to transition off the streets at the time of interviews (115). They were not yet ready for family re-integration and thus were included in the research figures as still being currently street connected.

Executive Summary

The research found that 69% of the children were **staying with an adult relative** and coming to the streets to work to make money or find food (7,946). Some of these children were working to try to raise their own school fees or to get food for themselves, whereas others were being sent to the streets by their relatives to earn money for the family.

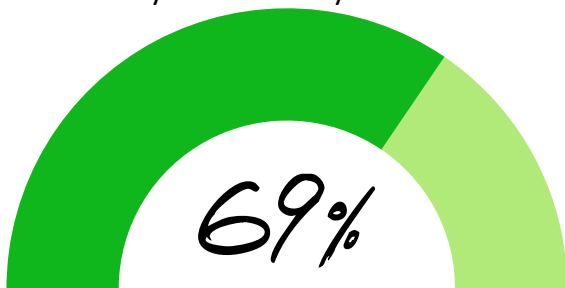


Figure 3: Children working on the streets staying with an adult relative

The research also showed that more children were on the streets during the **school holidays** than during school term time. This is due to the fact that some children come to the streets during the school holidays to try to earn money for their school fees or school requirements.



The age range of children on the streets

The street connected children that were interviewed ranged in age from **3 years to 17 years old**. There were some older youths who were interviewed who were aged 18 plus but this data was discounted. The fact that 3 year olds are coming to the streets is especially concerning as it shows that they are having to take on adult responsibilities from an extremely young age.

The **average age** of children who are sleeping on the streets or staying in child headed households is 13 years old, whilst the average age of children coming to the streets to work is 11 years old. Our data showed that girls are more likely to start coming to the streets younger than boys, but then become more hidden or leave the streets as they get older.

More research is needed into whether this demonstrates a pathway of children who start off working on the streets and then end up living full time on the streets or in a child headed household as they get older and used to the street life.

Refugee children on the streets

This research showed that there is a growing number of refugee children coming to the streets. However, it was noticed during this research that many refugee children are afraid to disclose that they are not Ugandan or else have started to identify as being Ugandan despite their origins.

Only 2% of children were officially registered as being refugees during this research (230) but the research team believes that the real figure is a lot higher than this, especially in the Buikwe District area across the Nile. South Sudan and the Congo were the countries that the majority of the refugee children interviewed came from.

Executive Summary

Length of time on the streets

This research found that 63% of the children had been on the streets for one year or more (7,255). This puts them at higher risk of experiencing violence or sexual trauma that might influence them to turn to drugs as a coping mechanism. S.A.L.V.E. believes that once a child starts taking drugs it is harder for them to leave the streets due to their addiction.

63% of children were on the streets for more than a year



68% of children surveyed were spending more than half their week on the streets (7,831) and a majority of children were there every day.

Where do the children come from?

This research found 31% of the street connected children came from the Jinja District (3,570).

69% of the children on the streets of Jinja (7,946) were from the Eastern region, and the most commonly named districts included Jinja, Bugweri, Iganga, Busia, Kamuli, Mayuge, Mbale and Tororo.

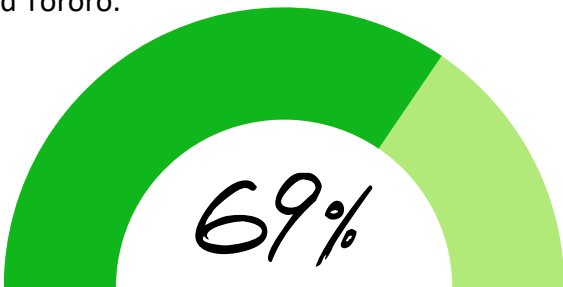


Figure 4: Children Jinja's streets were from the Eastern region

There was also a high percentage of street connected children from the north of Uganda (21% - 2,418) and most especially from the Karamoja region with the Moroto and Napak Districts being the most common.

How do children survive on the streets?

The most common activity done by the children on the streets for their survival is to sell items for money. This often includes scrap metal and plastic bottles, which they collect from rubbish pits and the streets. The children are being used as cheap forms of labour to act as the recycling system for the local area.

Family situation

40% of street connected children that were surveyed identified as having a mother as their main caregiver (4,606), compared to 24% having both parents or 7% having their father only. This shows that additional support for single mothers in the community could help to reduce the number of children turning to the streets.



40% of street connected children have their mother as their caregiver

36% of the children did not get regular support from an adult caregiver whilst on the streets (4,146). Children have told S.A.L.V.E. team members that this lack of care can make them feel they need to become independent at a young age and can make it harder for them to trust and rely on adults in their lives.



Executive Summary

Time in jail

A lot of children were unwilling to share if they had ever been arrested or not. This is a sensitive subject that can stigmatise children. Of the children who did feel comfortable answering the questions on this topic, 10% had been arrested at least once during their time on the streets. The majority of these children were released back onto the streets at the end of their time in jail.

The fact that many children returned to the streets shows that arresting children does not solve the problems that led them to the streets in the first place and therefore is not an effective way of helping children to successfully leave the streets. It is also a form of child abuse.

10% of street connected children had been arrested, and later returned to the streets



Education

A huge 18% of children on the streets of Jinja have never been to school (2,073), and a disproportionately high number of these children are girls.

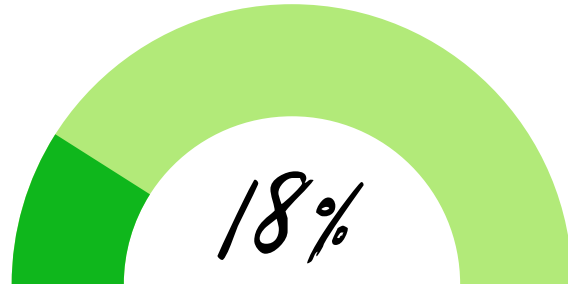


Figure 5: Children on Jinja's streets who have never been to school

Only 14% of the street connected children were going to school regularly (1,612) and were coming to the streets during the weekends, evenings, and school holidays to try to earn money for food and school requirements.

This research also found that 83% of children were not in an age appropriate class for their age (9,558), which makes them more likely to drop out of school.

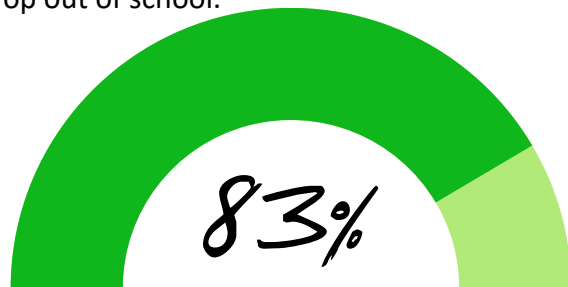


Figure 6: Children on Jinja's streets not in an age appropriate school class

This is a huge and worrying gap as it means that many children are missing out on getting an education, which means that they will have fewer opportunities to break the cycle of poverty in the future. It also means that Uganda is missing out on developing the talents of some of its young citizens to be able to better contribute and help their communities.

To read the full research report please visit: www.salveinternational.org/research/2023-head-count/

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report helps to show that the number of children living and working on the streets of Jinja and the surrounding areas has dramatically increased since 2017. This means that there needs to be an equivalent increase in support available for these children to try to understand why they have come to the streets and to resettle them back to a safe family home and help them to return to education.

The evidence shows that arresting children does not work as a deterrent to them being on the streets, since many children returned to the streets after being arrested. It is also a practice that goes against the rights of a child and thus should be stopped. Instead, more resources should be invested in trying to solve the issues that led the children to the streets in the first place.

The increased levels of family breakdown and poverty seem to be having a direct impact on the number of children living and working on the streets. This shows that a lot more work needs to be done in the wider community to support vulnerable families, especially those headed by single mothers, to try to make sure that children are not needing to run away to the streets in the first place. Additionally, more education needs to be done on the dangers of being on the streets for both the children and their families to better understand the risks they are facing.

33% of street connected children came to the streets in the last year. If this rate continues there could be over 20,000 street connected children in Jinja by 2026

As S.A.L.V.E International, we will try to reach out to more children in the areas identified during this research. We have a good track record of success in supporting children to leave the streets and reintegrate with their families.

However, we also call upon the Government both at the national and local levels to plan to include street connected children more prominently in their agenda. The only way that these issues can be resolved is by everyone working together. There needs to be increased support for the work of organisations like S.A.L.V.E. who are helping street connected children and more scrutiny to ensure the rights of street connected children are protected.

S.A.L.V.E. International's vision is to create a world with "No Street Called Home". We believe it is possible to reduce and eventually stop any child from having to live on the streets. But it needs everyone in the community to prioritise the issue, work together and invest time and resources into making this a reality.

Identified areas needing further research

- How children go from working on the streets to living there full time or in child headed households.
- How many children are on the streets out of choice or there to support their families.
- How best to find and support children in child headed households to return to safe family homes again.



Acknowledgements

We want to give thanks to Local Government officials in Jinja City and District who permitted us to undertake this head counting study to better understand the numbers of children who are living and working on the streets of Jinja City and the surrounding areas. We are also grateful to all the City and District Officials and the Local Chairpersons from the different communities we worked in, as well as the police for their cooperation in making this research a success.

We also want to appreciate the great work done by Retrak, now known as Hope for Justice, alongside the Ministry of Gender and other partners in conducting their head counting research in 2017, which S.A.L.V.E. participated in, and which gave baseline figures and a comparable research tool for us to use in this study. We are grateful for their advice and guidance to help us to carry out this project.

We also want to thank all the partner organisations who allowed us to meet with street connected children in their programmes.



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Finally, we want to give great thanks to the research team who helped to make this study a reality. They worked tirelessly to try to reach as many children as they could so that we could better understand their situations.

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