

Transition of Street Children to Off-Street Lives

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In memory of Beatrice, 14, one of many lives lost to the streets.

Introduction

Walking along the streets of most developing countries one notices an abundance of children working or begging. Their work is often limited to shining shoes, selling candies, or washing cars. They are only a portion of the children that roams the streets of cities in developing countries. The other portion is harder to find, or simply just ignored. The other population are the young girls behind the walls of a whore house, the kids sitting in jail, or hiding in the corners and under bridges. The other population referred to as the children *of* the streets.

It is important to clarify the definition of who are considered street children. The broadest definition of a street child is “any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults”¹ The UNICEF definition of street children provides additional clarity by creating three classifications: Candidates for the Street, Children *on* the Street, and Children *of* the Street.² Children *on* the street are those with a tendency of working on the streets during the day and returning to a home at night. Children *of* the street more closely fit the Inter-NGO definition, and are children living on the streets without any functional family support. They have no home to return to, and lack family protection or supervision.

Estimates on the number of street children vary significantly. In 1986, the United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs estimated between 30 and 170 million street children worldwide.³ In 1994 UNICEF estimated that there are 72,000 street children in Bolivia alone.⁴ The best defined estimate is UNICEF's 2004 report that there are at least "2,500 children living on the streets of major cities"⁵ in Bolivia.

Who are the "Children of the Streets"

Children of the street are negatively viewed by society. These children are often described as delinquents, criminals, drug addicts, and simply the rubbish of society. They are rarely referred to as children. In one author's experience these children are referred to as "urchins, little bugs, little criminals, fruit birds, dirty faces, vermin, mosquitoes or little farts."⁶ In general, "Society at large believes that street children are a group of irredeemable delinquents who represent a moral threat to a civilized society – a threat that must be exorcised."⁷

Consequently, children of the street are often mistreated. In one of the more noticed cases in 1995, when five children were killed by police in Brazil a majority of the public approved of the actions. A community survey taken a week later showed that 15% continued to endorse the actions.⁸ In 1993, TIME International reported "Because they [street children] are increasingly blamed for the rising crime rate in Brazil's cities, they have now become prey: an average of four a day are killed."⁹

The children of the street are regularly extorted, abused, raped and killed by society. One report indicates that the average age a girl of the street *first* experiences rape is at 13.8 years old. The same report indicates 44% of girls of the street will be

raped and 40% of girls will resort to prostitution at some point in time.¹⁰ In a recent study from Bolivia, 95% of the street children surveyed reported some type of abuse by police such as derogatory comments, rape, financial extortion, and physical beating. Twenty percent of those surveyed had been sexually abused.¹¹

Many countries have laws protecting the rights of all children, however the effectiveness of these laws often leave much to be desired. In Bolivia law requires that all children receive medical treatment at hospitals, yet over half (53%) of the street children reported health problems.¹² Although legally required, such services are often outside of the reach of the street children. “Health services are rarely geared to the needs of street children. They are often run at times and places that make them inaccessible.”¹³

The children of the street are misunderstood and their stories are not known. Contrary to popular opinion, their lives are not typically characterized by crime and amoral activities. As one author writes, “despite the popular assumption that street children are all thieves, scant evidence exists



Street Boy in Bolivia Sniffs Paint Thinner

about illegal activities.”¹⁴ Their drug use (88% of Bolivian street children sniff paint thinner¹⁵) is rarely the cause of them being on the streets, but a necessary reality of surviving on the street. Drug use is, for them, one of



Cutting

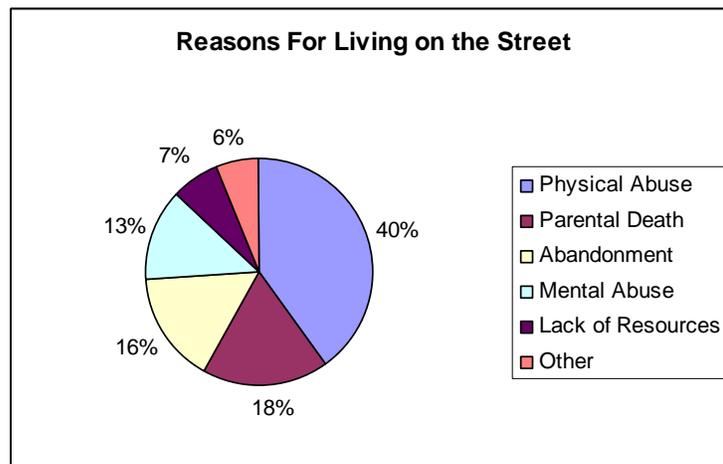
their many coping mechanisms. Another typical coping mechanism is self-inflicted

cutting. These coping mechanisms are ways of sustaining the police brutality, the rapes, the cold, and forgetting about their past.

Many see life on a street as a child’s escape from reality and an attempt to live an easy life. One author generalizes this viewpoint writing, “Those who have this perception [that they live a free and easy life] see the children living only for the moment, as if they are immersed in continual play.”¹⁶ However tempting it is to consider the freedom of the street something making street life desirable, we must remind ourselves that there is nothing desirable about street life. A 1997 survey “asked girls *of* the street and girls *on* the street what they perceived the results are of having lived on the streets might be... no positive aspects of life on the street were mentioned.”¹⁷

As with any childhood abuse, the child is not at fault. A large majority of street children come from poor families; however poverty is not the sole factor of becoming a child of the street.¹⁸ The results of a survey of Bolivian street children show that only 7% of children are living on the streets as a direct result of poverty. The children stated that they became street youth due to physical abuse (40%), parental death (18%), abandonment (16%), mental

abuse (13%), and lack of financial resources to support them (7%).¹⁹ The children do not live on the street because they are immoral or want a “free” life. In most cases children live on the street as a



result of amoral conditions in society. They are not a problem of society, but are reflective of society's problems.

Our Work

We are working as Development Coordinators for the Bolivian Street Children Project (BSCP) in La Paz, Bolivia. La Paz is the “functional” capital of Bolivia (Sucre is also listed as a national capital and is the “historical” capital) and is the highest capital of the world with an altitude between 10,000-13,000 feet. BSCP has a ministry working with the children



of the streets of La Paz, a home for former street children, and a transition program for street adolescents. Our work requires us to spend time on the streets working with current street children, helping children through transition into an off-street life, and with children and adolescents who have left the streets. The home accepts children from 6-14 years of age and we are currently developing a transition program for adolescents ages 16-18.

Our street work is mainly focused in an area of downtown known as “El Paseo” or “El Rio.” It is a short pedestrian way that leads under a bridge to a river. There are thirty to fifty children living in this area ranging in from infants to 20 year olds. The children often spend the days in the pedestrian walkway and spend their nights in small shacks alongside the river. Since this is one of the more contained areas for street children to live, we often see the results of the negative perception society has on these children. We have had to deal with a number of cases of police brutality. One major

case was when a police lieutenant woke up drunk downtown and realized he had lost both his cell phone and his wallet. His immediate reaction was that the street children had taken them. He called on-duty officers to go with him to where the street children live and went from house to house beating the kids and demanding a name of who stole the cell phone. That night 20-30 children were beaten, both men and women, some of whom were pregnant. Our investigations were unable to find any evidence that one of the children in this area had robbed the officer. A common event is for the police to come on a Friday or Saturday night and haul all of the children away to jail for the weekend. More frequently the girls are taken away. In the past boys as young as 12 or 13 have been sent to military training for one year to get them out of the city (most return to the streets afterwards.) There are cases of rape or attempted rape by police officers. There are individual beatings that have sent kids to the hospital. There are lock-ins where the entrance to the living area alongside the river is guarded 24 hours a day by two or more officers and the children are not allowed to enter or leave the area. Although such lock-ins are better than beatings, they are still a clear violation of the rights of the children. Part of our work on the streets is to protect the basic human rights of these children. We often work with Bolivian nationals to investigate both the claims of the police and the abuse of the children. The motives given by the police rarely are supported with any evidence.



The ministry for school age children (6-14) is “Centro Bernabé” or the Barnabas center. The center has plans for 6 homes, a school, soccer field, library, workshops and an administration building. Currently we have one home with capacity for 10 children and house parents. Each home has a family environment. The house parents are responsible for the children in the morning and evening and a daytime counselor assigned to the home is responsible during the day. In the morning the children receive private tutoring in a multi-grade classroom and attend public school in the afternoon. The children who have made it to this stage are stabilized and therefore are allowed to spend time with friends after school and invite school friends over to the house.

Prior to entering home of the homes at the Barnabas Center a child will enter our transition home. The transition home has a similar environment with 10 children and a multi-grade classroom. Children in the transition home will not attend public school and their education time is focused on bringing them up to grade level and preparing them for public school. The home is staffed by four educators working in shifts and is a training area for future house parents. The children living in this home are not allowed to leave the home unsupervised.

The transition program for adolescents is currently in development and is the most challenging program. The program focuses on adolescents still living on the street who are not yet adults and could be seen as a final attempt to prevent adult homelessness. Many of the adolescents have spent over half of their lives living on the street and therefore are accustomed to the behaviors that accompany such a lifestyle. Most of the adolescents have tried various programs while growing up, but in general the system has failed them. The transition program has three phases. In the initial phase the adolescent

leaves the street and to live for one to two months in a transition home from a partner organization. After their time in the home the advancement of the adolescent is reviewed with the counselors of the home to determine if they are a good candidate for an independent living situation. If mutually agreed upon we work with the adolescent to provide a small grant of \$100 for basic supplies (clothes, kitchen supplies, etc) and they move into a room paid for by the ministry. Within their first few weeks living alone they start working with one of our partnership businesses. Within 4 to 6 months they either start paying rent on their room or can choose to move to another room. We meet with each person individually during this transition time for Bible studies, encouragement and to teach them basic life skills.

Transition Process

The transition of each child is unique, however there are certain phases and influential factors. Each transition starts with a contact phase. The contact phase is on the streets and starts when first meeting a child and varies significantly in duration. In certain cases one might meet a child who is ready to leave the streets at that point and wants to make that change. In other cases this first phase may be a long process of building a trust relationship, talking about life on the street, spending time together as friends, and may or may not result in the child leaving the streets. The second phase is the initial transition. Most programs have a “Casa de Paso” or similarly named transition home. When a child first leaves the streets they enter into such a transition home. This system is designed both to protect the children who have stabilized from the temptations of the street and to help transition the new children into a scheduled lifestyle of school and chores. The transition process is not a stable one and children often return to the

streets a number of times before completing the transition phase of the program. The factors we discuss are mainly focused on how a child can successfully make it through this process. The third stage is integration. In this phase a child goes to a permanent home. The size of this home varies by program with anywhere between 10 and 60 children to a home. BSCP follows a family model meaning that when a child makes it to the integration phase they are permanently “adopted” into a home of up to 10 boys, each home with their own house parents. The final, sometimes considered the fourth, phase is independence. This comes after a child has completed schooling and has started to work or is married. Many programs provide assistance in this transition by helping these young adults acquire living quarters and a job.

This transition program is typically followed for school aged boys and girls. Within these programs once a child has reached the integration phase they are a regular member of society. Within the program of BSCP a child in this stage is attending public school, going to church, participating in youth groups, inviting friends over to their house, and going over to their friend’s houses. Programs for adolescents become complicated as the integration and independence phases are often integrated together. While this complicates the process for adolescents the transition process of adjusting to and learning life off the streets is the most vulnerable and important for all ages. Many children will enter this stage and only leave to return to the streets. One example is an adolescent in our transition program who spent 8 years of his life on the streets. During these eight years he entered the transition program of 5 ministries multiple times, yet at 17 years old is still a street child. An effective ministry must have an effective transition program. The last thing a child needs is to fail at another attempt to leave the streets.

The discussion on a successful transition attempts to look at what factors are important from the perspective of a child to the transition process as opposed to what factors make a program successful. Although most available research focuses on what makes a program successful, this approach has been selected for two reasons. The first is that a program is to serve individual children and therefore the program should be based on what works for individual children. Secondly there are factors that occur within the children that are not part of a program that are crucial to their transition. For example a program can decide whether to have a closed or open door policy, however a program can not decide or plan for a child to have a sense of hope, which must arise within each child individually but is crucial to their success.

A majority of the research was gathered through the experiences of successful and failed attempts to help children leave the streets. Information was also gathered from natural discussions with individual children of why they are on the streets, why they are *back* on the streets, or how they entered so many programs and never made it off the streets. Additional research has been done by looking into articles on drug rehabilitation, therapeutic communities, and the limited information available on street children programs.

The role of Christianity

The most important consideration for a Christian ministry is the role of Christianity, or the conversion to, in their transition process. A program that is based in Christianity will inevitably share the message of Christ's live, death, and resurrection with the street children they are working with. Many ministries may consider this the primary focus of their work, and the salvation of these children as the primary goal. This

brief discussion is not meant to suggest that the individual salvation of these children is not important. Rather, the purpose is to raise the question of whether the Christian message should be coupled with a message of off-street values and whether one should expect a conversion to Christianity to lead to a child leaving the streets.

The evidence clearly suggests that there is not a correlation between becoming a Christian and leaving the streets. Within our ministry there are both children who are Christians, and children who are not, who have made it into the integration phase of the programs and are fully established. In the population of children we work with on the streets there are both Christians and non-Christians living on the streets, and many Christians who pray daily for change and don't see it. While knowing about God's love and care encourages self-esteem, self-respect, and dreams for their lives, knowing God's love does not tell them they *must* leave the streets. Due to the certain dangers that are present with street life and certainly God wants a more just, safer life for these children. While we might see the role of the Church to improve the lives of these kids, scriptures tell us of a God who wants to know these children and love them regardless of their position in life. Psalm 51:16 tells us, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

One could also argue that a mature faith in Christ would result in characteristics that would lead them away from life on the streets. Such an argument could be based in the suggestion that a mature faith results in personal responsibility, honesty, self-esteem, and self preservation, which are contrary to life on the streets. A life on the streets often consists of robbing for sustenance, and a life of drug use, physical abuse by others. However there are those who live on the streets that make an honest living through

shining shoes, and have come to the streets in interest of self-preservation (fleeing from an abusive household.) There are some who live on the street and are faithful to their partner and care for their children. There are some who live on the streets and have a true love for God. The argument that a mature faith contains off-street values that will result in leaving the streets is dangerous. This argument complicates the message of salvation and although one might leave the streets while maturing in their faith they do not need to leave the streets in order to have a mature faith.

In order to remain true to the Gospels the goals of conversion and leaving the street must be seen as independent. While a Christian faith plays a crucial role in each of the important factors in a transition, Christianity in and of itself is not a factor, nor a predictor, of transition. Jesus may call individuals to leave their livelihood behind (Matthew 4:18-22), however this is God's work within an individual's life and not the work of a ministry to instruct someone to drop their nets in order to find Jesus.

Factors in Successful Transition

Realization of Situation

Prior to any transition a child or adolescent must be consciously aware of their situation. While one might not expect a seven or eight year old child to be responsible to make the decision to change, they must agree with the decision. For an adolescent to take ownership of their own transition, they must realize why the streets are not a good place for them.

In our experience this realization often comes as the result of an injury or a new responsibility in their lives. One of the most influential factors in seeing an adolescent change their lives is to be hospitalized. Out of three adolescents we are working with all

made the choice to change due to a negative event. After spending 9 years on the streets, one boy was hospitalized for a month after his broken leg failed to heal and he was hit on the head. After the hospitalization he went directly into a home. The best friend of one of the girls hung and killed herself, the next day she want to live with her mother again. Another girl left the streets after 7 years due to a hospitalization from malnutrition and urinary tract infections. At 68 pounds we had to tell her she would not survive another winter on the streets. She left the hospital to go to a home for girls. In other cases the responsibility of a child, or a girlfriend, can be the impetus for change. When talking to one of the adolescents in our program we discussed how he entered so many homes and always went back to the streets. He said that he just didn't know any better. He said that he didn't understand what life on the streets meant. Until recently he was not able to think through how this life would impact his future.

A parallel can be found both in looking at the first of the traditional "Twelve Steps" recovery programs. In Alcoholics Anonymous the first step is recognizing and admitting the problem and admitting they are powerless over alcohol.²⁰ A Biblical comparison could be taken from Christ talking to the woman at the well in John 4:7-26. In this story Jesus confronts a Samaritan women about her lifestyle and her claim to have no husband. In this story Jesus first helps the woman to realize the truth about her life before continuing. Just as one must realize their sins before confessing them, one must realize what needs changing in their life in order to take ownership and responsibility for that change. Following the same order as Psalm 51, what needs to be changed has to be known in order to change it.

Sense of Hope

A hope for a different future takes a child beyond simple wishful thinking. Hope encompasses an expectation of achievement. In Spanish the same word, *esperanza*, is used when hoping for something and when waiting for something. Wishing, on the other hand, lacks this sense of expectation. The transition process can only be successful when one sees the transition itself as possible. Without hope, a child is likely going through the process trusting someone else, but not believing for themselves the possibility of change. In an article on street children in Seattle, WA Cheryl Raleigh-DuRoff quotes one former street child, “If you don’t have hope you cannot make it.”²¹

Hope is intricately linked with the religious concept of faith. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “the assurance of the things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Hope and faith both look forward to something better, with the expectation of their arrival. In Hebrews 11 tells the stories of Abraham, Moses and others in the context of their faithfulness. These are stories of individuals who participated in faith through their actions, meeting God at the point where their actions must be met by God’s faithfulness. Likewise, a child who has hope for a better life is an active participant in their transition. Transition is not the actions of a single individual but happens through the participation of an individual child, a community, and divine intervention.

Community Involvement

The involvement of the community is critical for multiple reasons. The first is that fundamentally a child should not be responsible for their own future. A child of six or seven years old is not responsible for providing themselves with food, shelter, and education. It is the fundamental right of a child to receive these things from adults, either their parents or community. Therefore it is the responsibility of the community and the

Church to ensure that children are taken care of. Ultimately it is the community's responsibility to walk a child through this transition process and to encourage and participate with them. While a child needs to realize and understand their situation in the street to have a hope for transformation, in most cases someone needs to help them understand and make sense of their situation. Someone needs to help a child understand that the streets are not the right place for them, and that it is not their fault that they are there. In this way the community must be involved at the start of the process.

Additionally the resources needed for transition are significant. In the case of a child they need the commitment of someone who will help them make it through the transition period. They need a place to live, someone who can prepare them for school, and encourage them along the way. Adolescents need someone to help them with housing and someone willing to give them a job in an already tight job market. They need someone who is willing to invest in them and trust them. Both children and adolescents need a substitute family and an accepting community. In Raleigh-DuRoff's paper of street children she lists "The Help of People" and "Help of Organizations" as the two most important factors. She writes that "the help of people – family, friends, and professionals – was universally cited as the most important factor leading to a return to traditional living arrangements."²²

Closed Door Policy

Many programs have what is referred to as an "open door" policy. This means that anyone in their program is free to leave at any time. The principle behind the open door policy is to ensure that children are entering and staying on their own free will. In most cases the policy is very liberal, meaning that a child is allowed to leave without any

discussion of why there are leaving and whether it is good for them. While no program can force a child to stay, there are variations in the policy on letting children leave. What is referred to as a “closed door” policy does not mean that a child is forbidden to leave, but does mean that there are more restrictions on them leaving. For example many open homes allow a child to leave at any time to go anywhere without an adult and without an explanation. Other homes only allow children to leave only with adult supervision. In such homes, if the child wants to leave the home to return to the streets it happens either after a discussion with the counselors of the home or by escaping.

These are children and they are not expected to know what is the best for them. Just as a parent would not allow their own son or daughter to leave their house to go to the street, a home for street children must provide the same love and care. Children will run away from the home for the sole purpose of being pursued and use this as a test of commitment and love towards them. In other cases they leave simply to return to the illusions of life on the streets. As one of our adolescents has told us about his experience going in and out of homes, “I was young and I didn’t know what was good for me.”

A parallel could be made to God’s pursuit of Israel. The Hebrew Bible chronicles the repeated story of God’s chosen people worshiping an idol and forgetting God, God then reaching out through a prophet, Israel repenting and returning to worship Yahweh. Just as God pursues us through our journey of faithfulness, so must a child be pursued in their journey of life. While the open door policy is good in practice, we are called to a love that pursues children and encourages them in their transition. What a child needs is a person and a home that encourages them to stay, someone who they know wants them to be there, not someone indifferent to their presence.

Transition in Group and Encouraging Others

One element important in recovery programs is group therapy. The most common element of recovery therapy is that it is done in groups; such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, etc. In a paper investigating important attributes in therapeutic communities Nielson and Scarpitti write that, "Of all the strategies used to intervene into the negative behavior of chronic substance abusers, the therapeutic community is one of the most effective."²³ In their paper researching the effectiveness of therapeutic communities Nielson and Scarpitti emphasize the importance of having a sense of community, setting expectations and confrontation within the members of the community. These factors grow out of having a community of peers that are working through the same issue and the resulting ease of trust within this group of peers.

While a transition home could be considered a therapeutic community, these homes often lack formal activities that would lead to the beneficial components of having this community. Additionally many adolescents moving into a transition/independence phase are often living alone and working within general society. An effective program for these children and adolescents must provide an infrastructure that encourages relationships of trust. These peer relationships will then lead to confrontation when one individual is tempted or shows signs of returning to street life. The peer relationships allow for the forming of a community that has its identity in the transformation of its members.

Within our small group of adolescents the forming of such a community can be seen. This small group of peers often asks about one another or relays messages of encouragement to one another. They watch out for each other and desire to spend time together as a community. When one struggles with life away from the streets, the others

are concerned about them. They have asked to have a dinner together to spend time together. These communities whether within a home or with a group of transitioning adolescents must be formally encouraged in a way that empowers each individual in their ability to help the group and challenges each individual to be a part of the transformation of the entire group.

Preparation for Society

The final factor in a successful transition is proper preparation to enter society. In our experience with boys their preparation to re-enter school is critical to them completing the transition phase. In cases where a child has not had sufficient preparation to re-enter school they leave the home within weeks after returning to school. They are likely discouraged by not being at the same level as their peers, and are intimidated by the experience. Other boys who have received up to two years of private tutoring before re-entering school have had successful experiences. In the case of school aged children it is critical to their transition that they are at grade level prior to entering school and can feel at par with their peers.

While our experience with adolescents is more limited, they need a similar preparation in order to start working. Many of them have lived over half of their lives on the streets and are not accustomed to following the directions of others. Within the first week at a new job one of the adolescents commented that nobody has told him what to do for the past eight years of his life. Adolescents need to be prepared for this work experience, to understand what is expected of them and what they should expect of their superiors and co-workers. They need to understand what to do with their money, how to pay bills, and how to save for things they need and want. They need to learn how to

manage their time when they are not at work and how to avoid tempting places and people. For them part of being in society means dealing with the temptations that kept them on the street and controlling their lives to remain off the streets.

Summary

In the end it is individuals who change and therefore the important factors of transition will vary for each person. As Kilborn writes in his book on street children ministries, children deserve and require a relationship, not program, focus²⁴. What makes a difference in the lives of individuals is an atmosphere of love and relationships of trust. While all of the presence of these factors in their transition are important, without someone to love, encourage, and help them through the process they will not make it.

Committed to Individuals

We are committed to individual children and adolescents. We treat each one as though they are our own child. While this requires significant dedication to individual relationships, these are children and they deserve our individual attention. While society works to resolve the underlying problems that lead to children living on the streets we cannot forget the prophet words spoken by a child to the UN, “You call us the future, but we are also the present.”²⁵ Children are children only for today. The child of today is the adolescent of tomorrow and then an adult. Childhood passes as certain as time, and a childhood spent on the street passes even faster. As a community and as the Church we must respond to the needs of each child and provide a program that provides the conditions needed to enable and help them through a transition to an off-street life.

Footnotes

- ¹ Inter-NGO, 1985
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- ³ Tomkins Scanlon, et. al., "Street Children in Latin America," *Education and Debate*
- ⁴ Barreda Huang, et. al., "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street Children and Formerly Abandoned Street Children in La Paz, Bolivia," *Archives of Childhood Disease* (London), In Press - March 2004
- ⁵ UNICEF - At a glance: Bolivia - The big picture, "Http://Www.Unicef.Org/Infobycountry/Bolivia.Html," UNICEF, 2004
- ⁶ Huang, "A Comparative Analysis of Abandoned Street"
- ⁷ Tomkins, "Street Children in Latin America"
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- ¹⁴ Tomkins, "Street Children in Latin America"
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- ²¹ Cheryl Raleigh-DuRoff, "Factors That Influence Homeless Adolescents to Leave or Stay Living on the Street," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 21, 6 (December 2004)
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Amie L. Nielsen and Frank R. Scarpitti, "Changing The Behavior of Substance Abusers: Factors Influencing The Effectiveness of Therapeutic Communities," *Journal of Drug Issues* 27, Spring 1997
- ²⁴ Phyllis Kilbourn, Ed. *Street Children: A guide to Effective Ministry*, Monrovia, CA (MARC: 1997)
- ²⁵ United Nations, *Special Session on Children - UNICEF*, <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/documentation/childrens-statement.htm>: May, 2002

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