



CHILDREN IN STREET SITUATIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

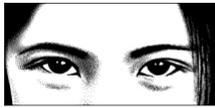
Qualitative Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study represents a first attempt of scientific analysis of children in street situations in Republic of Moldova. The aims of the research are: (1) to analyse the phenomenon of children in street situations in order to know and understand the nature and the evolution of the phenomenon and to identify the mechanisms for protection of these children and for preventing other children to be in street situations and (2) to create a profile or profiles of children in street situations by analysing factors contributing to this phenomenon from individual, family and social perspectives.

The present study is based on data collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted during October – December 2017 with 43 participants: 18 children in street situations aged between 10 and 17 years from Chisinau, Cimişlia, Nisporeni, Cantemir, Bălţi, Străşeni, Călăraşi and Rîşcani, 7 family members and 18 professionals working in the area of child protection (social workers, police workers, representatives of non-governmental institutions, psychologists, pedagogues and a physician) from Chisinau, Bălţi and Cahul. Also, the study included information from social work files of 13 children in street situations.

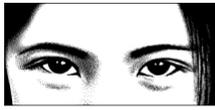
The data from **interviews conducted with professionals** indicate that they consider family poverty that correlates with parental alcohol abuse and, implicitly, lack of supervision as main reasons for children leaving their homes. Difficulties experienced by professionals in working with this category of children were caused by the fact that most children experiencing street situations come from other places than the cities in which they are identified. Many of the children, although they are brought back to the family by the police or by social services, return to the streets due to the unhealthy family environment. Also, children in placement centres usually do not comply with the rules set by the centres and constantly run away, making the process of school and social reintegration more difficult. Professionals mentioned the following



interventions carried out for children in street situations: parental counselling, child psychological counselling, medical assistance, mediation of relationships with different institutions, school reintegration, monitoring and placement. However, in most cases, these interventions have been unsuccessful due to parents' lack of collaboration, alcohol addiction and mother's "immoral" behaviours (i.e. multiple male partners). Professionals also noted their need for professional training in working with children in street situations and for specialized services, such as republican centres that can assist children from all over the country or transit centres that can facilitate children's accommodation to the institutionalized environment. With respect to collaborations with institutions, such as police, centres of family doctors, school or church, professionals mentioned both efficient and less efficient collaborations. The efficiency of collaborations was based less on institutional contexts and more on social and professional relationships created between the professionals who took part in this study. Also, according to professionals, children's chances for family and social reintegration decrease significantly if: the children spend more time in street situations, come from outside Chisinau, and/or have mental health issues.

From parents' point of view, the reason why their children left home was that they befriended other children in street situations. Although the parents stated that they tried to speak with the children about the risks they face while on the streets and made numerous efforts to bring them back home, they declared that they felt powerless and some of them resigned that, in five years' time, their children will end up in prison because of thefts.

Children who participated in the study mentioned that the main reason for leaving home was that they had been physically abused by their parents. There were also situations where the children were left unsupervised by parents gone to work abroad or because the parents divorced or one parent was imprisoned or died. Unlike professionals and parents in this study, who mentioned that children's first contacts with the street occur around the age of 10 years, children declared that these contacts happened at an earlier age, some when they were 4 or 5 years old. This can indicate that, before they are 10 years old, children's contacts with the streets were sporadic and during day time. Also, the street experiences of children from age 4-5 years until the time parents or professionals notice children as being in street situations may explain some of the difficulties experienced by professionals in reintegrating these children.



The present study identified **three main categories of children in street situations** (1) children for whom placement was established after having had a minimum contact with the street; (2) children with more than six months experience with street situations and (3) children from the former National Hotel. Children's experiences, however are very different and even within the same category, the factors that contributed to children being in street situations are multiple.

Children for whom placement was established after having had a minimum contact with the street are mainly children aged up to 10 years, especially girls. They come from very poor families, with many children where a parent either left to work abroad and does not keep contact, or is imprisoned or deceased. Children's contact with the street was for a period between one day and a month. Some of them were found by strangers, neighbours or relatives and others were handed over to community social services by their parents who reasoned that they cannot take care, feed or educate the child due to the family financial difficulties. Children's health was generally good. All children in this category attended school according to their age and had identification documents.

Children with more than six months of experience in street situations are mostly boys aged between 11 and 16 years coming from single parent families where the mother abused alcohol and had multiple male partners at the same time or at intervals between several months and several years. The reasons for leaving their homes are mainly parents' neglect and physical abuse. Generally, children spent their time begging on the street, but they also mentioned that they were looking for food in garbage containers, worked on collecting and selling scrap iron or prostituted themselves as forms of survival. Children's health problems included respiratory and kidney diseases and also neurological and psychiatric disorders. In absence of data about children's medical history before and after their contact with the street it cannot be accurately stated that these health problems were caused by their street experiences, although it can be associated with the street situations. Most children in this category smoked and some of them smelled glue. Children's school education usually ended in the eighth grade, although by this level they attended school sporadically and reached 14 years old with minimum writing and reading knowledge.

Children from the former National Hotel can be divided in two categories: adolescents and younger children of 9 to 12 years. The younger children were boys coming from outside Chisinau. Some of them had been taken back to their families but came back to the group. Young children



are seen by the older ones as needing their protection because „they are young (...) have no place to live”. This can indicate that these children had a family history that was similar to the children with more than six months of experience of street situations (alcoholic parents, mother’s multiple partners, domestic violence, child physical abuse). The adolescents in this group came from families where parents had been revoked of their parental rights because of neglect and physical abuse or even because of using children for begging or for sexual services. There were also children who were without parental care following mother’s decease and who had been “adopted” by the group. For some of the children, several emergency or temporary placements were made in centres located in Chisinau and outside the capital (in the case of one child, 14 such placements were noted). However, children ran away every time. The values of this group are freedom, unity and equal rights over goods (food, money, glue or other substances). Although most references to children at the former National Hotel were negative, describing children who were “bitter because of what they lived at home and on the street”, „savages”, glue and drug consumers or delinquents, the perception of members of this group is of a family where care and protection roles are divided between the older children and where the boys look out for the girls and get money for food. The school was perceived by these children as imposed by the rules of the placement centre. Most of them have minimum writing and reading skills. With regard to children’s health, mental health problems seem to dominate, almost all children being admitted into psychiatric hospital at one time or another for detoxification and for behavioural disorders.

As result of the analysis, this study makes the following **core recommendations**:

1. The child’s opinion should be taken under consideration by the social services when deciding placement in centres or return in the family. For those children who consent with the placement, an adjustment period to the life and the rules of the centres should be granted.
2. Series of support measures for the children who choose to live in the street should be developed. These can include: establishing a republican centre for children in street situations in Chisinau where children can come when they do not feel safe or they look for a shelter, a warm meal or they want to wash themselves.; ensuring the right to education for children who choose to live in street situations by establishing a mobile school or a “second chance” type of school; developing group programs adapted to children and youth for treating addictions; developing programs aiming to prevent sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.



Terre des hommes

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3. Public campaigns to educate parents on the responsibility to supervise their children should be developed as part of the 2016-2022 Inter-sectorial Strategy for the Development of Parental Skills and Competencies.
4. Professionals working with children in street situations should attend workshops and trainings.
5. Systematic collection of information on the number of children in street situations and on their migration tendencies should be conducted by community social services and police in order to achieve an efficient child protection intervention.