



FULL STORY

Help needed for street children in T&T

A SPECIAL REPORT By HAYDEN MILLS

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Criminal gangs use them as servile agents, drug lords as surreptitious couriers and pervers as their personal sex objects.

All the stakeholders-social welfare services, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the police and social scientists-admit these facts about street children-but the problem persists.

A survey in October by director of the Social Investigations Unit at the Ministry of Social Development, Dr Russell Foote, identifies at least 154 street children in Port of Spain and 57 street children at institutions in the capital city.

Children are persons under the age of 18, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Street children, according to University of the West Indies (UWI) sociologist Dr Ronald Marshall, are "children who leave their homes or are forced to leave their homes and sleep in abandoned buildings".

A point made by Marshall-based on data he collated in 1997 and 1998 and analysed in the book "Return to Innocence"-was supported by director of National Family Services (NFS) in the Ministry of Social Services Delivery, Eunice Gittens:

Most of the country's street children are not orphans or even homeless.

Gittens told the Sunday Express there were basically two types of street children in Trinidad and Tobago: "Those who have no homes to go to because their parents abandoned them, and those who do have homes and families but, for one reason or the other, are left to or made to fend for themselves."

The latter describes the majority of street children in Trinidad and Tobago, Gittens revealed.

Marshall profiled the typical street child as "male, Afro-Trinidadian, between the ages 10 to 14, attends primary school, returns home at the end of the day and still manages to engage in aspects of sociability with his counterparts from mainstream society".

"He is not homeless," the profile continues, "and views his parents in a positive light. Above all, he comes from the low socio-economic ladder (of society) where his parents are either blue-collar workers or unemployed."

These children leave home due to abject poverty or abuse in the home, whether physical, emotional or sexual. Despite this, most return home and have a natural love for their parents and caregivers. "An innocence," Marshall explained.

Gittens said whenever a street child was reported to NFS, it tried to locate the child and investigate his/her background.

If feasible, she said, the child was reunited with his/her family or placed in an institution.

But, she disclosed, many children who were reunited with their families usually ran away again.

Some of these children were actually sent out to peddle, Gittens said, or pushed into prostitution.

When they reach the streets they tend to remain in the street life.

"It (living on the streets) is very addictive," explained Jocelyn James-Ransom, administration co-ordinator and counsellor at the Credo Foundation For Justice, Nelson Street, Port of Spain.

The foundation, one of the NGOs which undertakes the challenge of dealing with displaced boys, receives a subvention quarterly from the Ministry of Social Services Delivery.

James-Ransom noted that the boys had access to games, a playground and "superb" remedial classes at the foundation.

But a lot of street children opt to not take advantage of the resources at the Credo Foundation or those of other NGOs.

James-Ransom said the foundation had several children in residence but there were about five to eight who "drop-in" to take a bath, get a change of clothes, eat, watch television and/or play some games.

She explained that the lure of money kept them on the streets.

By begging and doing odd jobs, a street child can make between \$80 and \$100 in one day, said James-Ransom.

"Soft-hearted women rarely turn them away," she said.

One street child who spoke with the Sunday Express two Wednesdays ago said money was the reason why he had left Credo Foundation and vowed never to return.

The boy, who said he was 12 and named Arnold, said: "I went there with ah hundred dollars and when ah ask them for it the next morning they didn't want to give mih so I take my things and gone."

Arnold was just finishing up some doubles and about to drink a Vita Malt when he spoke with the Sunday Express. He was sitting on the curb obliquely opposite a businessplace on Chacon Street, in the doorway of which he and three other boys had slept just hours before.

These children felt a sense of freedom on the streets-there are no authority figures, no rules, no chores, no responsibility and no structure to be assimilated into, James-Ransom explained.

More compelling was their desire to be away from "a home" which, to them, was the source of their problems, she added.

But the stark reality, as painted by WPC Elizabeth Daniel of the City Police, is that children often run from the frying pan into the fire.

Daniel is half of a two-woman team constituting the City Police Welfare Department.

Though street children tend to perambulate in groups, James-Ransom and Daniel agreed that they were not necessarily safe in numbers.

"That's what they consider safety," James-Ransom said.

To illustrate the point, Daniel pointed out how easy it had been for this reporter to observe them for hours undetected.

"You see, imagine if you were someone else," the policewoman remarked.

Street children rarely participate in petty crimes, far less violent ones, of their own accord.

In the four years that Daniel has been attached to the City Police welfare department, she has arrested "hardly any" street children. The few cases were for pilfering money from home or other small items.

Reporter HAYDEN MILLS spent some time observing and speaking with street children in downtown Port of Spain:

At 7 p.m. three Saturdays ago, two boys were playing games at DVD Movies and Games World on Charlotte Street, just opposite Express House. It's a favourite haunt of many street children.

At 1.43 the next morning, one of the two boys joined a group outside the 24-hour KFC outlet on Independence Square.

Two of the boys were assisting the "boss lady" sell pirated CDs nearby. A third, who was joined by one of the boys from the arcade, was milling around 'Ras', who sold nuts, cigarettes, and other small snacks. Two others sat on the window-sill of the KFC outlet facing Broadway.

At 3.12 a.m., the two who had been selling CDs, who later gave their names to the Sunday Express as Kevin Williams and Michael Thomas, and one of the two who had been sitting on the sill, went to the doorway of a businessplace on Chacon Street. After about 25 minutes, they were sleeping together on their bed of cardboard boxes.

In contrast, four men were asleep in separate nooks and crannies along the same street.

At 4.30 a.m. security guards, with batons in hand, ran the boys from the area.

At 7 a.m., when Williams and Thomas were approached by the Sunday Express, they ran off.

Fifteen minutes later, when they were approached again at the CD stall, they spoke, but hesitantly.

Williams and Thomas, who were organising the CD rack, were in the company of their friend from the arcade and another boy.

This new boy, with a half-pack of cigarettes and a fold of notes in one hand, checked his money quite conspicuously. It could not have been more than \$40.

The boy from the arcade was playing a hand-held electronic game.

They all said they were 15 years of age, one after the next when asked, although two paused before responding.

They all said they were not homeless or orphans, and lived with relatives in or around Port of Spain.

In fact, one boasted of living in a big wooden house. He was then jeered at by another of the boys, who said: "A wouldn't house, a wouldn't toilet and a wouldn't bedroom."

They all said they had finished school.

The "boss lady" was very pleased at the prospect of the children's plight being "highlighted".

She admitted she was engaged in "child labour" but lashed out at the Government for not "taking care of all these children sleeping on the streets".