

Headcount of Street Children in Taroudannt, Southern Morocco

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Introduction

Throughout the urban areas of Morocco, many children live or work on the street. Living on the street is associated with multiple risks, including physical violence, sexual violence, drug abuse and death¹. Anecdotal reports suggest that the number of children on the street in Moroccan cities has been increasing as a result of rural-urban migration and low employment rates nationally, but there is a lack of empirical studies to corroborate this suggestion.



Together with our partners, Groupe Maroc Horizons, we undertook an observational headcount of children on the street in at-risk situations in Taroudannt, a city of 100,000 people in the Souss-Massa-Draa region.

This study was derived from the head counting methodology developed by StreetInvest which has been employed in a number of studies with street-connected children including projects in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Ghana^{2,3,4}. The aim of the project was to quantify and categorise children living or working on the streets of Taroudannt in order to provide a base for informing the development of future interventions. This is the first quantitative headcount study carried out in an Arab/Muslim North African country.

Method

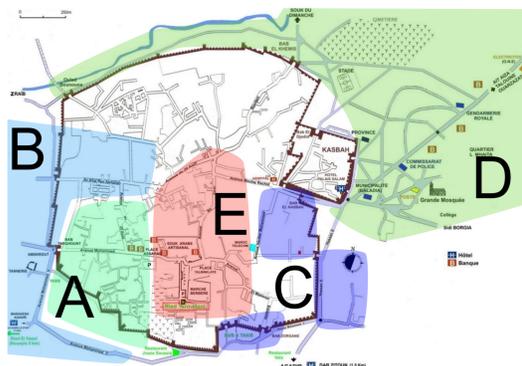


Figure 1

Based on situations or behaviours associated with street life, five headcount categories were defined: 1) Physical needs neglected; 2) History already known by social workers; 3) Permanently or principally on the street (defined as children observed unaccompanied by an adult after eleven at night, the time determined by the research team to be a culturally appropriate curfew.); 4) Witnessed engaged in street-related activities (begging, stealing, smoking, drug-selling, substance misuse, street work, gambling, collecting rubbish, accompanying tourists, working as maids (girls)) and 5) Unaccompanied by an adult in a high risk area before 23:00h. Children counted were classified by these categories and by age and gender.

The city was divided into five zones. Five one hour long headcounts were conducted in each zone over a three week period between June and July 2013: one morning count, two afternoon counts and two night counts. Each count was undertaken by one of the two social workers and the researcher.

Results

More unaccompanied children in high-risk zones (category 5) were counted than street-connected children in the first four categories. These children were not considered street connected because they did not display observable street-connected behavior, but they were counted in the research because of their potential to become street connected. They are not included in the following results.

A total number of 260 street-connected children were counted in Taroudannt over the three week period. Age groups 7-12 years and 13-17 years together represent 92% of all children and the majority of these are boys. Girls make up less than 5% of the total number of children counted. This data is shown in figure 2.

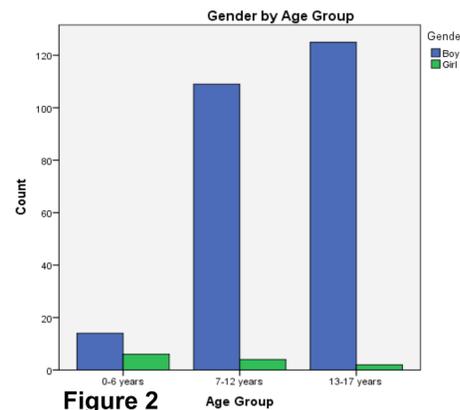


Figure 2

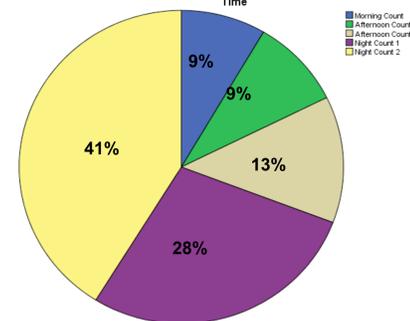


Figure 3

Figures 3 and 4 show the number of children observed during different time periods. The highest proportion of children (69%) was observed during the night counts. One in three of these children were aged 12 and under.

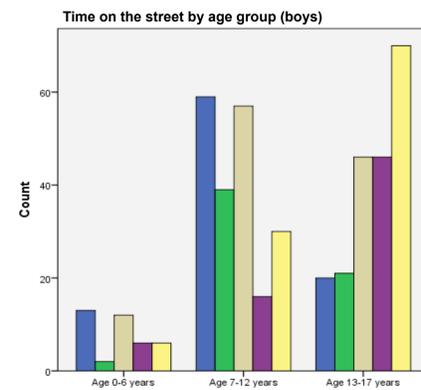


Figure 4

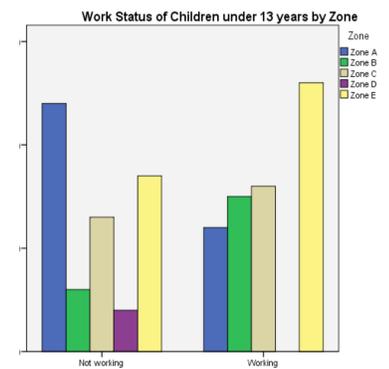


Figure 5

The work status of children under 13 years old is demonstrated in figure 5. This is divided per zone and, as may be expected, the zone with the highest proportion of working children is zone E which is where the souk is located. By contrast, there were no children observed to be working in zone D which is on the outskirts of the city. The total number of street-connected children counted under the age of 13 years is 133 and more than half of these (52%) were recorded as working.

Discussion

The majority of children counted as street connected during the study pertained to the third and fourth categories: 3) Permanently or principally in the street and 4) Activities witnessed. Within the fourth category most of the children counted were working. This may be because many of the street-connected activities listed in category four are difficult to witness as children often do not engage in them publicly or during long periods of time. The 'girls working as maids' sub-category would have been especially difficult to witness as these girls work in the residences of their clients. In addition, many street-connected children may have been sleeping at home, or engaged in normal activities during the time of the count, and therefore researchers would not have counted these children.

The results showed that boys outnumbered girls by a factor of 20 to 1 in all counts. Again, this may not mean that these girls are not in similarly vulnerable situations as their male counterparts, but rather that they are less publicly visible.

Both quantitative and qualitative head count methods are limited in their ability to accurately count a target population. It is especially difficult to count street-connected children because of their high mobility and the elusive nature of their activities.'



A strictly observational methodology relies heavily on the social workers expertise concerning the lay of the city and the local population, and especially in identifying children at risk of engaging in risky and dangerous street-related behaviors. In order to accurately determine if a child observed during a count is street connected, the researchers must be familiar with cultural and social factors that influence 'normal' behavior for children.

Conclusion

This research project sought to produce a headcount that accurately represents the minimum number of street-connected children in Taroudannt, that MCT can use to inform future program design. There are big logistical, methodological, and communicative challenges to counting street-connected children. 260 street-connected child were counted during the period with a further 204 who may have been, or were at risk of being street-connected.

References

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