

Child sexual abuse among street children: a comparative study of on-street and of-street children in the Port Harcourt Metropolis, South-South Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: This study contrasts child sexual abuse (CSA) among on- and of-the-street youngsters in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Recognizing the vulnerability of these children due to their profession as street vendors. Child sexual exploitation, which involves sexual interaction beyond the age of consent or awareness, poses major risks to street children, including the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI). The project attempts to overcome this gap by conducting a comparative examination of on- and of-street youth.

Methods: A sample of 287 street children aged 8 to 18 were recruited from the Port Harcourt metropolis using a multistage sampling technique. Data was collected using a semi-structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire.

Results: One hundred fifty-five (54.0%) of the participants lived on the streets, whereas 132 (46.0%) had a place to return to. Overall, street children had a high rate of child sexual abuse (49.8%). Sexual abuse was much higher among of-the-street children (71.2%) than on-the-street children (34.2%). Both groups experienced penetrative and non-penetrative patterns of sexual abuse; both patterns were shown to be more common among street children.

Conclusion: The findings show a high rate of child sexual assault among street children in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, with the street children being particularly vulnerable. It is critical that the Nigerian government and civil society work together to end all types of child labor.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse, On the-Street Children, Of the- Street Children, Nigeria

Introduction

The United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) defines a street child as "any girl or boy

for whom the street in all its ramifications, including unoccupied dwellings, vacant spaces, has become his or her habitual abode and or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed

by a responsible adult (1)." UNICEF divides street children into two categories: "ON the street children," who labor during the day but have a home to return to at night, and "OF the street children," who rarely or never come home and lack family support. According to studies, the majority of street children fell into the first category rather than the second (2-5).

Child sexual abuse (CSA) affects 19.7% of women and 7.9% of men globally, according to 65 studies from 22 countries (4). According to the review, Africa had the highest prevalence rate (34.4%), Europe the lowest (9.2%), America 10.1%, and Asia 23.9%. Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe reported CSAs of 0.8%, 0.3%, 2.0%, 0.4%, 4.3%, and 0.7%, respectively (4). CSA was underreported in Nigerian hospitals and communities, with rates ranging from 2.1% to 77.7% (6).

Studies on street children have revealed both peer and adult sexual assault (3,5,7). Street child sexual abuse was prevalent in Egypt, with 53% in Greater Cairo and 90% in Alexandria (3). India has 38.1% prevalence (7), whereas Uganda has prevalence of 27.1% (8). South West Nigeria police questioned an 18-year-old street youngster. 49% of the children were commercial sex workers, and 11% had been raped and were at risk of sexually transmitted infections (9). Another survey found that 69.9% of street hawkers in Anambra state, South East Nigeria, had been sexually molested (10).

The increased prevalence rates of sexual abuse observed in the Egyptian and Nigerian studies may be ascribed to the assessment of both penetrative and non-penetrative sexual abuse in these studies, as well as the involvement of a substantial number of Egyptian research participants in transactional sex. The lower prevalence rates observed in the Indian study could be attributed to the study population, which was exclusively male. The prevalence rates in various studies may vary depending on study populations, sample sizes, and street child classifications. However, there is a scarcity of data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse among different kinds of street children in Nigeria.

The purpose of this study is to compare the frequency and patterns of CSA among street and off-the-street children in Port Harcourt, South-South, Nigeria. Furthermore, it will address the study questions: Is there a substantial difference in the prevalence of child sexual abuse between ON and OF street children, and what are the patterns of child sexual abuse experienced by ON and OF street children? The study's findings are designed to fill information gaps and provide insight into the scope of this dilemma and its implications.

Methods

This research was an analytical cross-sectional study conducted on 287 street youths in Port Harcourt Metropolis during a three-month period. The study population included both male and female street youth from Port Harcourt Metropolis. In the study, street children were defined as those who make their living on the streets but still have a home to return to (**children on the streets**), as well as children who live on the streets without any family support (**children of the streets**), in accordance with the UNICEF definition of street children (11).

Inclusion criteria was street children ages 8 to 18 who have spent at least one month working on the streets. Exclusion criteria was street kids with intellectual disabilities and psychiatric illnesses.

The sample size for comparing two proportions was utilized to determine the sample size for this study (12). In total, 287 street youngsters were recruited.

Study Instrument

A semi-structured interviewer questionnaire with two sections: socio-demographic and child sexual abuse, was employed. The CSA questionnaire was adapted from a prevalence survey conducted by Halperin and colleagues (13). The questionnaire has an Alpha Cronbach's reliability test score of (0.81) (14). The questionnaire on child sexual abuse included information about both penetrative and non-penetrative forms of child abuse. Penetrative sexual abuse exposure included inquiries about sexual intercourse, digital penetration, and oral sex. The non-penetrative CSA questions included sections on voyeurism, fondling and touching of body parts, and exposure to pornographic content.

Study Procedure

The study group was selected using a multi-staged sampling process. Because of the study population's heterogeneity and geographical spread, a multi-staged sampling procedure was used. They form clusters in various areas throughout the study region. Four wards were initially chosen at random from the Port Harcourt Metropolis by balloting. Following that, two crossroads were chosen at random from each of the specified wards in Port Harcourt Metropolis. These connectors were utilized to form clusters. Many street children operate from junctions. At each intersection, street youngsters were recruited for the study using snowballs. A local youth leader assisted in approaching the street children. Street children who matched the inclusion criteria were enrolled. All of the selected street youngsters

volunteered to take part in the study. The data was analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. The findings were presented in the form of tables and charts, which depicted the frequency and proportion of qualitative variables. Bivariate statistics, notably Chi-square tests and odds ratios, were utilized to investigate associations. A p-value of <0.05 was judged statistically significant.

Ethical approval

The University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital's Research and Ethics Committee (UPTH/ADM/90/S.II/VOL.XI/377) and the Rivers State Ministry of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation (MSWR/AD/G/1416/211) both provided ethical clearance. Additionally, verbal authorization was acquired from youth/trade unions in the chosen study sites. The study participants were given information about the research, and their parents or guardians were present. Confidentiality was preserved, and individuals were given the choice to withdraw without prejudice. The study participants, as well as their parents/guardians, provided assent and written consent.

Follow-Up

All street children who were confirmed to have experienced penetrative sexual assault were given a documented referral to the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital's Social Paediatrics Clinic for counselling and sexually transmitted infection screening. A few of the study participants went to the hospital for further evaluation. All attempts to contact the study population who were unable to come for additional follow-up were unsuccessful due to the nomadic nature of street children and the incorrect contact address provided.

Results

Children on the street were slightly more common among the 287 respondents than children off the street, as indicated in Table 1. The demographic data obtained revealed that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 15 and 18. Female responders outnumbered males by a tiny margin. The majority of street youngsters used street trading (hawking) to survive. Table 2 shows that almost half of the study participants had worked on the streets for 1-3 years.

Table 2 demonstrates that the majority of respondents had stable homes, however the majority of their parents belonged to a lower socioeconomic class.

Forty percent of the street youngsters were homeless and had no place to return to.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of respondents had suffered some type of sexual abuse. Figure 2 reveals that elderly adults persuaded roughly one-third of the respondents into looking at their genitals. A lesser number of responders were forced to watch an elderly person masturbate. A greater number of respondents were fondled, caressed, or touched an elderly person's genitals. Some street youngsters were made to see pornographic images, and a handful were photographed naked by an older person.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, both types of street youngsters had penetrating sexual experiences.

The prevalence of sexual abuse in street children was found to be strongly associated. More street children had been sexually molested than other children. Table 3 also shows that off-the-street children were 5 times more likely to be sexually abused than children on the street.

Table 4 demonstrates that numerous patterns of sexual abuse were significantly greater in street children than in non-street dwelling children.

Table 1. Social demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Frequency(n=287)	Percent (%)
Type		
Children on the street	155	54.0
Children of the street	132	46.0
Age		
<10 years	5	1.7
10-14years	119	41.5
15-18years	163	56.8
Sex		
Male	142	49.5
Female	145	50.5
Family type		
Single parent	54	18.7
Monogamous	158	55.1
Polygamous	47	16.4
Extended family	28	9.8
Education		
No formal education	36	12.5
Quoranic education	15	5.2
Primary	115	40.1
Secondary	121	42.2
Activities on the street		
Hawking	200	69.6
Menial jobs	59	20.6
Begging	28	9.8
Duration on the street		
Less than a year	62	21.6
1-3years	143	49.8
4-6years	76	26.5
Over 6 years	6	2.1
Parents Still Married		
Yes	227	79.1
No	60	20.9
Deceased	16	5.6

Table 2. Social demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Frequency(n=287)	Percent (%)
Fathers occupation		
Employed	222	77.0
Non employed	50	17.4
Deceased	16	5.6
Mother's occupation		
Employed	208	72.5
Non employed	71	24.7
Deceased	8	2.8
Father education n=283)		
Primary	106	37.4
Secondary	94	33.2
Tertiary	3	1.1
No formal education	80	28.3
Mother education (n=283)		
Primary	110	38.8
Secondary	61	21.5
Tertiary	1	0.4
No formal education	111	39.3
How many sisters		
None	21	7.3
1-3 sisters	211	73.5
4-6 sisters	49	17.1
Over 6 sisters	6	2.1
No of brothers (n=284)		
None	13	4.6
1-3 brothers	195	68.7
4-6 brothers	72	25.4
Over 6 brothers	4	1.4
Live with		
Parents	71	24.7
Uncle/aunt	58	20.2
Relative	6	2.1
Non- Relative	20	7.0
Alone (Batcher)	7	2.4
On the street e.g. motor park/ under bridge/ uncompleted building	125	43.6

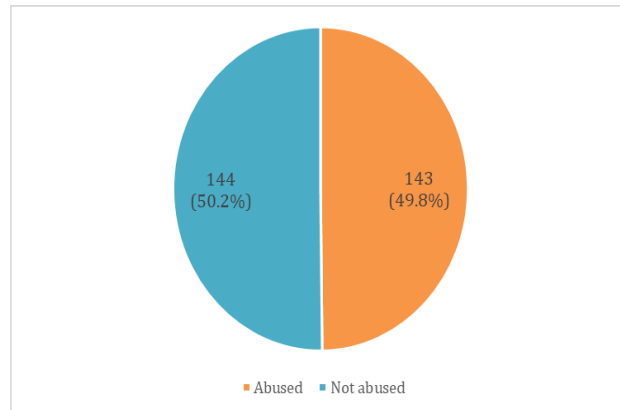


Figure 1. Prevalence of sexual abuse

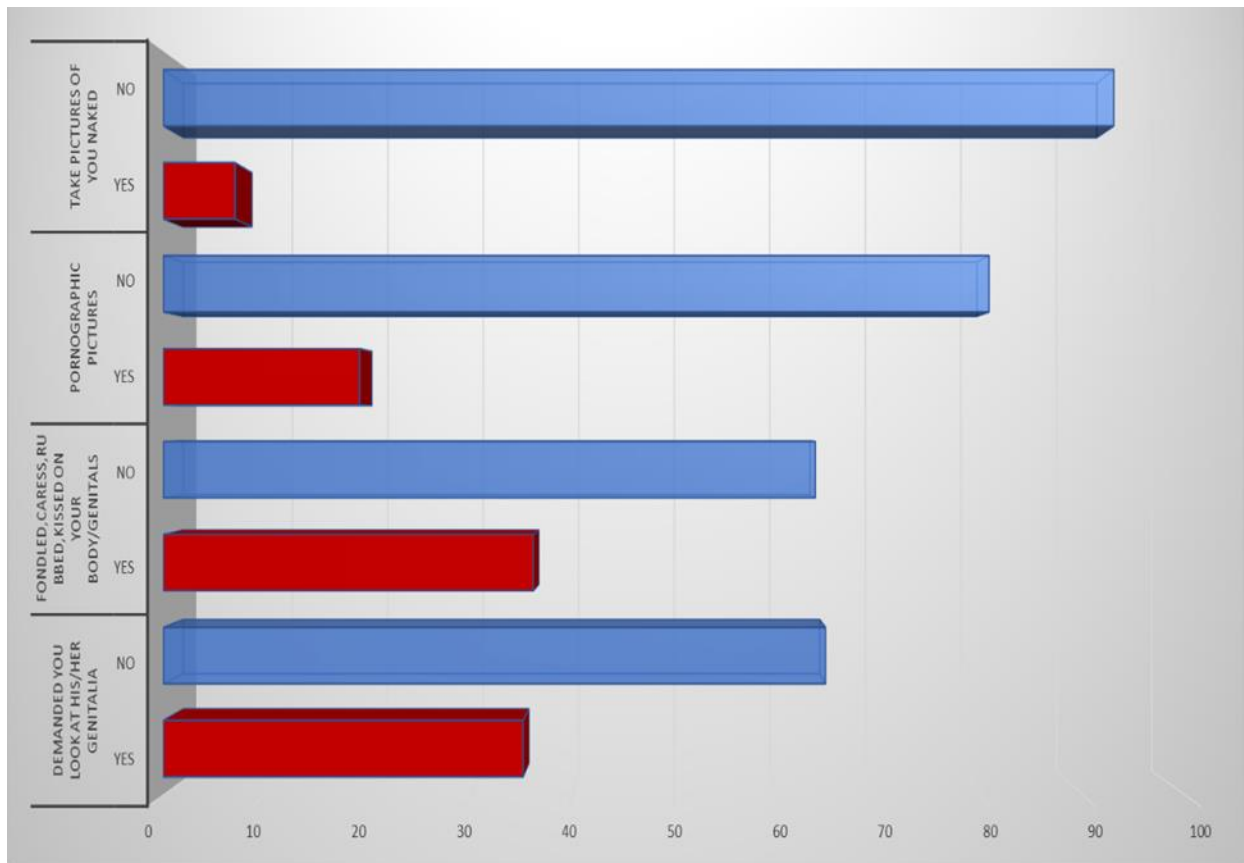


Figure 2. Pattern of sexual abuse

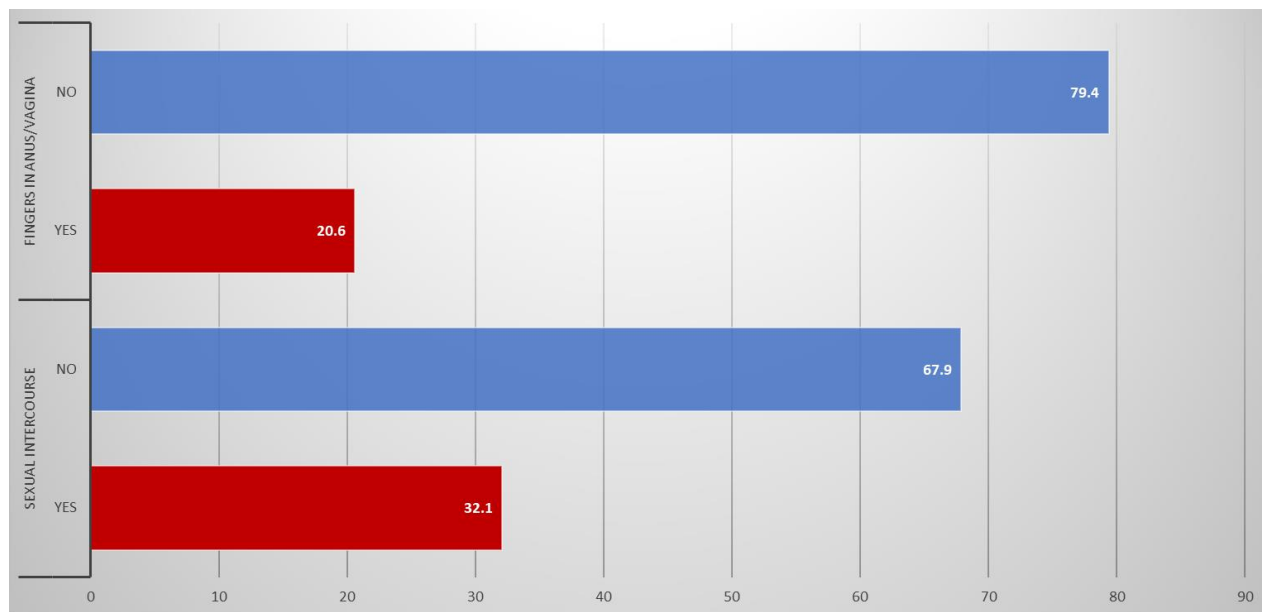


Figure 3. Penetration pattern of sexual abuse

Table 3. Comparison of prevalence sexual abuse among on the street and of the street children

Variable	On the street	Of the street	χ^2 (P-value)	OR (95% C.I.)
Sexual abused				
Yes	50(32.2)	94(71.2)	43.271(<0.0001) *	5.195 (3.134 – 8.611)
No	105(67.8)	38(28.8)		

OR: Odds ratio; **C.I.:** Confidence interval

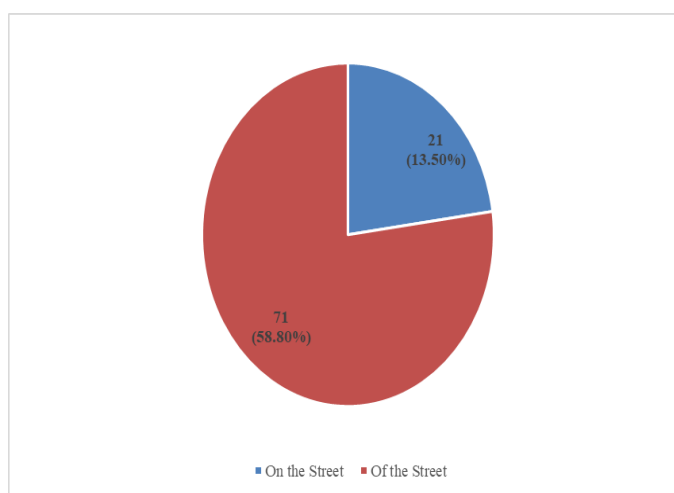


Figure 4. Comparison of prevalence of penetrative sexual abuse between on and of the street children

Table 4. Comparison of the pattern of sexual abuse in difference in children on the street and children of the street

Variable	On the street	Of the street	χ^2 (P-value)
Demanded you look at his/her genitals			
Yes	21(20.8)	80(79.2)	69.217(<0.0001) *
No	134(72.0)	52(28.0)	
show you his/her genitals			
Yes	10(10.8)	82(89.2)	87.630(<0.0001) *
No	150(75.0)	50(25.0)	
Watch him/her masturbate			
Yes	5(9.8)	46(90.2)	48.787(<0.0001) *
No	150(63.6)	86(36.4)	
Undress/fondle with another child			
Yes	0(0.0)	15(100.0)	18.585(<0.0001) *
No	155(57.0)	117(43.0)	
Fondled, caress, rubbed, kissed on his/her body/genitals			
Yes	32(28.3)	81(71.7)	34.181(<0.0001) *
No	123(70.6)	51(29.4)	
Fondled, caress, rubbed, kissed on your body/genitals			
Yes	25(24.0)	79(76.0)	58.973(<0.0001) *
No	130(71.0)	53(29.0)	
Pornographic pictures			
Yes	26(37.1)	44(62.9)	31.677(<0.0001) *
No	129(59.4)	88(40.6)	
Take pictures of you naked			
Yes	3(15.0)	17(85.0)	13.169(<0.0001) *
No	152(56.9)	115(43.1)	

Table 5. Comparison of Pattern of sexual abuse in children on the street and of the street

Variable	On the street	Of the street	χ^2 (P-Value)
Sexual intercourse			
Yes	21(22.8)	71(77.2)	52.999(<0.0001) *
No	134(68.7)	61(31.3)	
Fingers in mouth/anus/vagina			
Yes	5(8.5)	54(91.5)	61.987(<0.0001) *
No	150(65.8)	78(34.2)	
Sent you naked pictures			
Yes	0(0.0)	15(100.0)	18.585(<0.0001) *
No	155 (57.0)	117(43.0)	

Discussion

The study found that sexual abuse occurs in both types of street children. However, it was much greater among OF street children than ON street children. Furthermore, OF street children were five times more likely to be molested than ON street children. This is not surprising given that street children have no supervision and sleep in environments or unsafe places that provide little or no protection from sexual abuse. As a result, they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by strangers, their fellow street children, and may engage in transactional sex to survive. They may possibly have been abused before ending up on the streets. The reduced prevalence rates observed among street children could be attributed to the fact that they have shelter at night and are less vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Furthermore, they are under parental supervision, and some of their parents and guardians may be selling their wares or working nearby on the streets.

This study also found that many homeless and street-dwelling children have experienced both types of sexual abuse. These youngsters were subjected to non-penetrative sexual abuse by being fondled, massaged, and pressured into watching pornography, taking naked photos of themselves, or receiving naked photos. Penetrative sexual abuse suffered by street children includes digital penetration into the genitals, oral penetration, anus penetration, and sexual intercourse. OF street children were more likely to experience non-penetrative and penetrative sexual abuse than ON street children. This is understandable considering their higher incidence of sexual abuse. Children on the street are far more vulnerable to non-penetrative CSA since no limited space is required. They are visible on the streets and can be drawn into corners or touched inappropriately. Pornography, one of the most common types of non-penetrative CSA among street children, is likely due to easy access to social media and print media. In our African setting, embarrassment, shame, stigmatization, fear of being accused, and the need to keep the abuse hidden may all contribute to the lower prevalence of penetrative CSA observed among street children (15). The greater rate of penetrative abuse among street children may also be linked to their close physical closeness and habit of sleeping together in public places, which can lead to progressive sexual contact. As discovered in various studies (3,5,15), extended contact with some assailants owing to sharing sleeping quarters or regular proximity could be a cause.

Regarding the finding of a high prevalence rate of CSA among street children. A study conducted in

Ethiopia (16), reported exposure to CSA among both OF and ON street children. The Ethiopian study ascribed this to some of the participants engaging in substance addiction, which is a documented risk factor for sexual abuse, and the majority of street children engaging in transactional sex for survival. There was no comparison between the two groups.

It was a qualitative study in which concentrated group discussions and group interviews were held. The study's findings showing OF street children are more exposed to CSA than ON street children differ from those reported by Ayaya and colleagues (14) in Western Kenya. The Kenyan Study found a greater prevalence rate among ON street children than OF street children. The lower prevalence rate of sexual abuse observed among OF the street children in the study when compared to this study could be attributed to the smaller population of "OF the street children" employed in the Kenyan study when compared to the population of ON the street children used in the study. The implications of this finding in this study and other similar studies highlight the well-known fact that street children are vulnerable to all sorts of sexual abuse, transactional sex, and early exposure to heterosexual and homosexual activities. All of these can lead to communicable diseases, such as sexually transmitted infections like Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, which can have negative consequences for their mental health and overall development.

Our study found that a large number of street children living and working on the streets (OF the street children) were exposed to penetrative CSA, which is comparable to a study conducted by Nada in Egypt (3). This could be owing to the increased number of study participants, who came from two major cities in Egypt. Furthermore, the bulk of the study participants were older, with the majority falling between the ages of 15 and 18. Furthermore, the prolonged time they spent working on the streets could have contributed to the high prevalence seen. A study conducted in South Eastern Nigeria (15) found that street children were more likely to experience non-penetrative sexual abuse than penetrative CSA. However, this study was conducted just among hawkers and was not a comparative comparison. The exposure of street children to all forms of CSA highlights the hazards they confront in their quest to earn a living and serves as a wake-up call to key stakeholders to take steps to guarantee that children are off the streets and sufficiently monitored and protected.

Limitations

The sample size is modest, which may restrict its generalizability. However, due to the nomadic nature of street children and their frequent relocation, obtaining a bigger sample size may prove problematic. Participants may have had difficulty recalling specific specifics of the sexual abuse. This was addressed with a lengthy questionnaire depicting the various types of sexual abuse.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate a significant frequency of sexual abuse in both types of street children. However, OF street children were five times as likely to have been sexually molested than ON street children. Both groups of street children were subjected to both penetrative and non-penetrative sexual assault. Implementing additional protective measures, such as safe homes for street children, is critical for their protection. The execution of the country's child rights law, which protects children from child labor, is critical for ensuring the safety and well-being of street children, both socially and psychologically, as well as facilitating their optimal growth and progress. There are few studies that compare CSA among street and off-street children. Street children represent aberrations from the norm. It is hoped that the study's findings would encourage more research on the characteristics, risk factors, and consequences of child sexual abuse among ON and OF street children.

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