

Socioeconomic And Psychological Determinants Of Runaway Among Street Children: A Thematic Review

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Abstract

Children running away from home are a complex social, economic, institutional, and administrative issue. This study unveils the phenomenological lived experiences of street children. Twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with street children by enlisting them and their parent's demographic characteristics. The thematic analysis showed that street children faced anomalies of dysfunctional families, insecure attachment patterns, and the negative influence of the joint family system. They experienced high levels of physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse by family members, strict discipline, and harsh punishment by madrassa and school teachers. Low socioeconomic status, child labor, role reversal, peer pressure, and lack of social skills contributed to the phenomenon of runaways. It led to increased abuse in the streets by the drug mafia, sexual assault, human trafficking, and sexually transmitted disease. Homesickness and seeing parents' love for their children encouraged them to reconcile with their families, but the rejection made them habitual of runaway. The findings implied that a multidisciplinary strategy should be used to rehabilitate street children, involving parents, community members, local religious leaders, pediatricians, clinical psychologists, NGOs, law enforcement agencies, and the

government. The study has novel findings for exploring the link between the demographic characteristics of the children and their parents. The internal and external motives are explored before and after the runaway, street life challenges, their struggle to reconcile with the family, and coping strategies to readjust in streets or families in Pakistani culture. Thus, these findings will enrich scientific understanding to study this topic further.

Keywords: street children, runaway, thematic analysis, socioeconomic, psychological determinants

Introduction and Literature Review of runaway

Children are entitled to civic, cultural, educational, and social rights in a civilized society. Every child is entitled to specific protection, a strong parent-child relationship, and their own identity, access to food, shelter, and medical care. They also deserve a good childhood free from violence and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, and disability (Leonard, Graham, & Bonacum, 2004).

Ecological systems theory discusses the four-layered environment with bi-directional effects which balance cohesiveness and flexibility throughout the life span of the individuals. Healthy child development is dependent on the positive interaction between the following four systems (1) Microsystem (family, school, religion, peer groups, and neighborhoods), (2) mesosystem (interaction between family, education, community, and religious groups), (3) ecosystem (nature and surrounding), and (4) macrosystem (the pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by an individual in a given setting). Positive interaction between these four systems results in positive parenting and healthy child development. The conflict between these four systems adversely affects the child's normal development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Darling, 2007).

Early caregiver connections shaped children's attachment patterns. Children with secure attachments will enjoy the blessings of adult interpersonal relations, high self-esteem, healthy love connections, and the ability to self-disclosure. Insecure attachment styles and early abuse, neglect, or traumatization strongly relate to oppositional and conduct disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). Harlow (1958) strengthens this notion that securely bonded newborns grow up with more self-esteem, self-reliance, and autonomy. They are high achievers and have good social and emotional intelligence, with a low level of mental health problems.

The young schema model reflected that an early toxic relationship is associated with depression at a later age (Lim & Barlas, 2019). Maltreatment is connected with perceived parenting (poor care, excessive rejection, control, and unhelpful parenting approaches) and depression (Lim & Barlas, 2019). Parenting that is authoritarian and careless is linked to children's poorer self-esteem (Pinquart & Gerke, 2019). Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles interact with the children's aggressive behaviors (Masud, Ahmad, Cho, & Fakhr, 2019). These notions are supported by the family systems theory (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiiie, & Uchida, 2002), which helps

to understand family interactions and their surroundings. It describes that an individual's functioning is determined not so much by intrapsychic factors as by a person's place in the system in which they find themselves subject to the system's pushes and pulls. It also includes emotional roles, love, care, intimacy, expectations, and demands of the family members. It addresses hierarchy, relationships, and boundaries. It clarifies allegiance problems, family, and institutional culture. Belief systems, double binds, projects, self-correcting, and self-reinforcing feedback loops can promote or hinder domestic violence and abuse.

Domestic violence is any form of abuse committed by one person against another while living together or married. Women and children are the victims of domestic abuse worldwide due to a lack of power and authority. It is not limited to physical assault. It also includes psychological, emotional, sexual, and economic aggression. It affects women's mental health and quality of life, consequently harming the long-term mental development of their offspring. Those children who witness domestic violence may experience some behavioral and emotional issues. They become the culprits after victimization and the never-ending cycle of abuse generated. If victims cannot bear the victimization, they try to run away, and children join the street life for their survival as the last solution (Almıř, Gümüřtař, & Kutuk, 2020).

Street children (girl or boy) are those individuals who meet the criteria of following five characteristics: Their activities (beginning, selling things, singing on the highway, garbage collecting, theft or picking pockets), food (eating leftover or junk foods), appearance (vagabonds and dirty), name (lack of identity and respect), and locations (roads, broken buildings, bridges, and parks). They are inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults (Joshi, 2021). UNICEF classifies street children as either on the street or off the street. First-category street children have to some extent, parent-child relationships. The second category is estranged from his family. Whatever the reason, they are despised by their family, parents, caretakers, relatives, and society. Giving homeless children a place to live, food, clothes, education, safety, love, care, intimacy, or a way to escape sexual, social, emotional, mental, physical, or psychological abuse does not exist (Fukuda-Parr2003).

They are made to scavenge for food and shelter on the streets. In addition to robbing them of their innocence, the streets also turned them into ratcheted beasts while they were young. They escaped to the streets to avoid being abused by their parents, relatives, and madrassa teachers on a physical, financial, sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual level (voluntarily or by force). Sadly, abuse is more prevalent on the streets. Before they end up on the streets, these kids occasionally endure sexual abuse, but once they are there, their lives are in a perpetual state of instability, and they have to cope with it (Iqbal, 2008). Resolution on the Rights of the Child and Human Rights Council (Lloret-Blackburn, 2011) found that poverty, unequal distribution of resources, child labor, and domestic and sexual abuse induced children to run away. Tragically, fleeing the streets exposes kids to trafficking and prostitution, worsening maltreatment. They worked in houses, rag-picking, shoe-shining, firewood collection, animal care, street vending, dyeing, begging, prostitution, and other jobs. Ibrahim et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature review on how child labor affects children's health in low- and middle-income nations. Results of 25 cross-

sectional studies indicated that child labor was a significant public health issue. It strongly correlates with multiple adverse health effects, such as developmental problems, malnutrition, and infectious and system-specific diseases. It is also associated with behavioral and emotional disorders and impaired coping efficacy.

Street children who sing-beg are psychologically and sociologically distinct because they disrupt the peace. As they mature, their social contacts are inadequate for their development. Abuse, violence, and antisocial behavior have created age-inappropriate personalities. Bajari and Kuswarno (2020) described the verbal language employed by street children singer-begging to explain how they communicate with adults and examine their lives through their interpretation of adult speech. 12- to 17-year-old singer-begging children worked as porters, junk collectors, and merchants and spent eight hours or more on the streets. They smoke, drink, and breathe toxins (rubber cement glue). While using dynamic, intentional, and concentrated communication, street children sang. They created a vocabulary that portrayed sorrow, brutality, violence, seduction, survival, unity of groups, and languages.

Street children are a growing social problem that exists worldwide. According to the Street Child Protection, Education Center (SCPEC) and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, it is hard to determine the exact number of street children worldwide. The problem is compounded by their desire to travel, mistrust of authority, and definitional differences (Raffaelli & Koller, 2016). UNICEF counted 1.5 million street kids in Pakistan. They are viewed as ratcheted beings and treated cruelly, more like dogs than human beings (Abbassi, 2005). Despite being a cause of suffering and danger, their population is growing every day. Street survivors mature too quickly and pass away at an early age. They are brutally attacked, tormented, and murdered every day, consciously or unknowingly. A street child is viewed as a societal issue in much international scientific literature that paints a depressing picture of society (Ahmadkhaniha, Shariat, Torkaman-Nejad, & Moghadam, 2007). In 24 different countries worldwide, the prevalence of child sexual abuse ranged from 8 to 31% for girls and 3 to 17% for boys, according to 55 studies that underwent meta-analysis. Out of 100 persons, nine females and three boys experience forced sexual contact in the streets (Belur & Singh, 2015). The Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs conducted the UNICEF-funded survey in collaboration with University College Cork. They interviewed 1000 street children regarding gender, abuse, familial, socioeconomic, emigration, educational backgrounds, and day-to-day details of the children's lives. They compared it to Latin American street children and their Ethiopian counterparts. Results of this study indicated that most street children are male and 44 percent are raped, and 26 percent are sexually attacked (Lalor, 1999). Based on the literature mentioned above, which describes the balance and imbalance pattern of family dynamics. It is intended to explore the phenomenology of lived experiences of street children by using phenomenological and emic approaches. Demographic characteristics of street children and their parents are taken into account. Pre and post-struggle, causes, and consequences of runaways among street children are explored. Their decision to permanently or partially leave their parent's home is based on their circumstances. Forces compelled them to adapt to this risky

street environment despite their tender age and innocence are explored.

Methods

The qualitative research study used phenomenological and emic methodologies to examine the runaways' actual lived experiences in the context of Pakistani culture. Their street life challenges, struggle to reconcile with their families, family reaction to this offer, and their necessitations for runaway were unfolded. Twenty volunteer participants who lived in Pehchan Shelter Home Lahore, aged 10-15 years ($M = 13.21$, $SD 2.83$), were selected through the purposive sampling method. Detailed demographic characteristics of street children and their parents were presented in Tables 1 and 2. Data were collected (up to saturation) through the demographic form and in-depth semi-structured interview protocol. Twenty in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted. Participants were given verbal and written consent before participation in the study. The participants' choices were considered while deciding the interview's time, date, and venue. Their right to confidentiality and anonymity was upheld. Although they had the choice to end the discussion at any point, they completed the duration of 40 and 50 minutes on average. Participants and the authority of Pehchan Shelter Home were thanked for their corporation and time. The audio-taped data were transcribed and interpreted through thematic analysis. Its major and supportive themes were extracted and interpreted. Throughout the investigation, all APA ethical guidelines were taken into account.

Results

The current study unfolded the phenomenology of street children's lived experiences. Demographic information about the street children and their parents is recorded. Street children pre- and post-struggling to run away, coping strategies for street and family abuse, and struggle for survival by any means are reported in the following tables:

Table 1 The Parents of Runaway Children's Demographics (N = 20)

Parents Profile	Variables	Frequency	
Age	$M = 35.25$, $SD = 8.26$		
Marital Status	Father	Widow	2
		Remarry after divorce	2
		Two wives	2
	Mother	Living together	14
		Divorced	4
		Remarry after divorce	3
Family System	Joint	18	
	Nuclear	2	

		Living together	13
Education of parents		Illiterate	17
		5 th – 6 th Grade	3
Profession	Father	Laborer	16
		Cook/Driver	4
	Mother	Housewife	5
		Maid	15
Monthly Household Income		Rs. 15000-20000	
Drug addiction	Father	Yes	8
		No	12
	Mother	Yes	2
		No	10

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of street children's parents. It represents the characteristics of the disintegrated family system with low socioeconomic and educational status.

Table 2 Children's Pre- and Post-Runaway Characteristics (N = 20)

Child Profile	Variable	Frequency
Current Age	M = 9.30, SD 1.93	
Age before runaway	n = 10 (6 years), n = 6 (8 years), n = 4 (12 years)	
Current age	M = 13.21, SD 2.83	
Frequency of runaway	First time	4
	2 nd time	6
	Multiple time	10
Duration to live in streets	1 year	4
	2-4 years	6
	5-6 years	10
Gender	Boy	20
	Girl	0
Number of Siblings	3-5	6
	6-8	10
	9-10	4
Birth order	1 st	5
	2 nd -3 rd	7

	4 th -5 th	3
	6 th -7 th	2
	8 th -10	3
Try to reconcile with family after runaway	20	
	No	0
Reaction of family	Accepted, but the intensity of abuse is increased	10
	Not accepted	10
Child reaction to family abuse after runaway	Habitual of runaway	17
	Never visited home after runaway	3
Prefer to live with	Parents	13
	Street	7
Living with before runaway	Mother	
	Father	
	Both	
Education	Illiterate	
	Can write name	
	Know some verses of the Holy Quran	
Monthly income before/after runaway	Rs. 2000-4000/10000-15000	
Drug addiction before runaway	Yes/ No	1/19
Drug addiction after runaway	Yes/No	18/2
Sexual abuse before runaway	Yes/No	4/16
Sexual abuse after runaway	Yes/No	16/4
Physical abuse before runaway	Yes/No	20/0
Physical abuse after runaway	Yes/No	20/0
Emotional abuse before runaway	Yes/No	20/0
Emotional abuse after runaway	Yes/No	20/0

Table 2 represents the demographic characteristics of street children: their tender age, low socioeconomic and educational status, and abuse frequency.

Table 3 Street Children's External Risk Factors for Running Away (N = 20)

The extrinsic determinants of runaways among street children are shown in Table 3. The main

Major Themes	Supportive Themes
External Factors of Runaway	
Abuse	Physical, psychological, and emotional abuse by parents and elder siblings Physical abuse by the father Sodomy or sexual abuse by madrassa teachers and elders Harassment and hostility Child labor/economic violence Domestic abuse and family violence Interpersonal problems of spouse The violence by the joint family system Honor killing
Ineffective communication between parents and child	Malnutrition and child neglect Unwanted child due to insufficient resource Lack of supervision by the parents due to divorce, remarriage, poverty, or extended number of children and family members Negative criticism and highly expressed emotions by parents Negative parenting The pain of being unheard and misunderstood Lack of respect and fear of being caught Sense of insecurity
Dysfunctional families	Relationship issues, distrust, and distress Single parenting due to divorce or death Drug addiction and illness of parents Remarriage and polygamy Multiple partner relationship of parents Lack of social skills

themes are abuse (physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and sexual by parents and madrassa teachers), ineffective communication between parents and child, and a dysfunctional family system. Supportive themes clarify that domestic violence, which leads to divorce and remarriage, is caused by the aggressive father owing to drug addiction, extramarital affairs, polygamy, sickness, and poverty, continuing the cycle of abuse. Neglect and malnutrition of children are inextricably linked to dysfunctional homes. Honor killing was preferred by poor, short-tempered parents. Joint families and poisonous social ties shame children's mistakes. Hostile parenting causes interpersonal communication challenges. Children experience the emotional

distress of having their characters ignore and cast doubt on them. At a young age, insecure attachment patterns are developed due to a lack of social skills and emotional intelligence. In a disintegrated family system, children formed the schema of being undesired, which is somewhat accurate. They are prone to abuse when working as children since they are not closely supervised. However, the money they made via child work ended them envious of adults who could support themselves instead of their financially struggling parents. They fantasize about the runaway act collaborating with their friends to minimize the hostile environment.

Table 4 Internal Issues Contribute to Street Children Running Away and Challenges of Street Life

Major Themes	Supportive Themes
Internal factors behind runaway	Trust and relationship issues Inner sentiments of worthlessness Difficulty controlling emotions
Children’s struggle after runaway	Want to Escape from the violence and abuse desire to become economically independent Find peers with the same conditions. Fanaticized the better future Desire to leave violence-free independent life Peer pressure/drug or game addiction Initially enjoyed the independent Thrilling exploration introduced them the street culture. Join the street leader and street friends Learned to earn for survival Lack of close supervision invites genuine threats. Peer pressure introduced substance abuse.
Challenges of street life	Mafia and law enforcement agencies intensified the physical, emotional, sexual, and substance abuse. Faced harassment, sexual assaults, and sodomy, Vulnerable to human trafficking The intensity of all types of abuse is increased. Experienced sexually transmitted disease Faced with health issues, infection, and disease

Homesickness	Survival insecurities, lack of care and affection Painful to watch parents love their kids lack of purpose in life Lack of respect, recognition, and dignity Special events like Eid ul Fitr and Eid ul Adha induced sorrow and Loneliness. Miss the family, siblings, and friends
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The internal variables that prompted kids to move out of their parent's homes permanently are shown in Table 4. The influence of money was first exposed to them through child labor, and they sought to leave their terrible situations. Together with their companions, they fanatically envisioned a world free from violence and prosperous economically. The initial excitement quickly fades as street life's hardships of human trafficking, sexual assault, harassment, and drug addiction add to the canvas of physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. On important national holidays, when they witness parents' love for their children, they experience homesickness. They try to make amends with their families to improve things since they miss them.

Table 5 Family Reconciliation and Runaway Response (N =20)

Major Themes	Supportive Themes
Strive to reconcile with family	Homesickness and intensity of physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse compelled them to reconcile with their family.
The reaction of the family	Immediately reject them Prefer honor killing The intensity of abuse is increased upon their acceptance. Social rejection The stigma of lousy character and humiliation is increased
Reaction upon the rejection/ acceptance of the family	Try to gain a good repute Social rejection, taunt, and stigmatization tempted the soured feelings. Become habitual of runaway They decided never to visit the family.

Table 5 displays the street children's quest for reconciliation and the family's response to this offer. Their families promptly reject this offer since it would have damaged their status as respectable

people. Toxic relationships stigmatize children's personalities, and when abuse becomes their fate, they start to run away frequently.

Discussion

This article unveils the phenomenological experiences of street kids from an emic perspective in the cultural setting of Pakistan. It draws attention to the socioeconomic background of the parents of street children. The reasons for runaways' pre and post-decision runaway struggle, the hazards and risks that children living on the streets encountered, and their coping mechanisms were enlisted. The descriptive statistics of the street children and their parents' demographic variables were displayed in Tables 1 and 2. It indicated that street children and their parents belonged to a low socioeconomic status with little or no education. Street children were part of the dysfunctional family system, which was high in domestic abuse owing to poverty, divorce, polygamy, death, remarriage, or partner disease. Parents, instructors, and madrassa teachers abused children. Their large family systems had a number of siblings and few earners. Poverty compelled them to child labor which introduced them to the money-making strategies that resulted in to dream of an economically sound and violence-free street environment.

The findings of this study were in line with the family system theorists (Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie, & Uchida, 2002). They reported that economic issues forced the children to assist their parents' work, and inherent beggary or living in the street developed the norms for the children. The family's disorganization, remarriage, and polygamy was the main reason the children were street kids. Family disruption in childhood was associated with anxiety and sadness in adolescents. Low socioeconomic and educational status, including poor parenting and domestic violence, threatened the normal development of the children. Street children's final schooling affected their thinking and decision-making. Most street children did not attend school or had less than a third-grade education. They were the victims of corporal punishment by the school or madrassa teachers (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandeveldel, 2009).

Zarbali (2020) found that modernization and economic struggle threaten the normal dynamics of the current family system in which dysfunctional families are more vulnerable to role reversal. Poverty violated the roles of social exchange theory which assigned a specific role and responsibility to the child-parent relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Fundamental institutions like marriage and parenthood have declined in quality. The children were forced to leave their families permanently due to high divorce rates, family strife, lousy parenting, and ineffective parent-child communication. Unseen powers like the Mafia catch them when they flee the house, preventing them from ever assimilating into society. Inflation, uneven resource allocation, lawlessness, irresponsibility, inefficiency, and government inability have generated this social problem.

Fahlevi (2020) reported a significant relationship between the father (education, income, inheritance), mother (education and economic condition), family (number of children, working

members, dependent, income, and inheritance), and community (education system and employment opportunities) variables with child labor. Baumann (2000) reported that in developing countries (Indonesia, China, Kenya), most street children were male instead of female due to physical abuse and a preference for living with friends. Their age ranges varied from 10 to 15 years old, and they had less family support and a high level of father abundance compared to part-time street children. Family disruption in childhood, domestic violence, identity crisis, child abuse, poor parenting, parental education level, occupation, socioeconomic status, and poverty was significantly associated with conduct disorder and antisocial behavior in adolescents. Lloyd (2018) found a significant relationship between domestic violence and child abuse. It would have an indirect impact on the child if they witnessed it. This is associated with physical, emotional, and mental learning obstacles and disruptive behavior in the classroom.

The findings of Tables 3 and 4 reported the internal and external motives for running away among street children. It indicated that children faced the multiple challenges of social, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse added to economic deprivation despite their child labor. A dysfunctional family and poor parent-child communication worsened the child's neglect and maltreatment. This study confirmed the findings of Kagan (2014). He found that family relationships and child-rearing prioritized "intergenerational growth" and "intergenerational preservation" in psychological transition. Violent parenting styles traumatized their children. Therefore they did not learn compassion, loyalty, honesty, and stress management. However, regular, dysfunctional, and pathological family models illustrated that family dynamics and communication patterns varied from normal to psychopathology, which was apparent in the context of street children.

The findings of Table four indicate that street children struggle to cope with street life, which worsens domestic abuse in the form of drug addiction, sexual assault, harassment, human trafficking, drug mafia, and law enforcement agencies. Richter, Groft, and Prinsloo (2007) found that children living and working on the sunny side were most affected by environmental dangers, homelessness, physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse, and exploitation. Le Roux and Smith (1998) found that some individuals considered street children unpleasant, illegal, and criminals. Mahaseth and Shukla (2021) described that they grew more violent and committed crimes to support their addictions. These youngsters became hardened criminals controlled by the Mafia for drug trafficking, prostitution, and other crimes. Police "round-ups" of youngsters before significant public events violated their rights to non-discrimination and freedom of association. Sometimes these youngsters were unlawfully jailed or killed. They were detained on vague allegations for their involvement in unlawful small companies and assumed guilty of various wrongdoings.

88% of Pakistani street youngsters have sex. Street children's commercial sex has made bus terminals and parks prostitution and sexual exploitation hotspots. HIV/AIDS spreads among children due to insufficient HIV/AIDS understanding and risky sexual

conduct. The government's indifference, apathy, and childlessness have exacerbated the issue. Unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and STDs were exposed to these youngsters without awareness. The government should implement preventive measures to provide inexpensive and accessible healthcare to these children without judgment (Khalid, Nasir, & Rehman, 2014). Ali and Muynck (2005) observed that these children suffered fever, fatigue, dizziness, and vomiting. Thus, medical care consumes most of their daily budget.

Despite all the street challenges, UNICEF reported that street children's reason for living on the streets was not just financial necessities but also family violence and rifts. Even if street life is tough, it offers more value to these youngsters than living in a violent household they cannot escape. Children could escape violence on the streets, but in their families, they must endure the beatings. A significant relationship was found between authoritarian parenting, peer aggression, hyperactivity, distractibility, behavioral dysregulation, anxiety, fear, and externalizing and internalizing difficulties (Marcone, Affuso, & Borrone, 2020).

Conclusion

Runaway children pose complex social, economic, institutional, and administrative issues. Street children faced dysfunctional households, insecure attachment patterns, the negative influence of the joint family system, physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse by family members and neighbors, severe discipline, and harsh punishment by madrassa teachers and school faculty. Child labor forced by poor socioeconomic class parents helped them become economically independent and meet friends in similar conditions. Runaways, fueled by peer pressure, role reversal, and social skills, boosted drug mafia misuse, and street STDs. They tried to reconcile with their families, but upon rejection, they became habitual runaways and coped with the street challenges.

Implications

The findings suggested that parents, community members, local religious leaders, physicians, clinical psychologists, NGOs, law enforcement agencies, and the government should collaborate to rehabilitate street children. The study examines runaways' demographics, pre- and post-struggle, obstacles, and coping techniques in Pakistani culture. Previous research didn't cover it. These discoveries will help scientists to research these topics.

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