

Whoever reaches the children will determine the next generation
Christians work with Street Children throughout Latin America
By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Iquitos, Peru—Americo was kicked out of his home when he was seven and wandered from town to town up and down the jungle rivers of Peru for over five years. In and out of jail, he lived on the streets and kept moving.



Eventually Javier Villacis Fajado, the director of a shelter for street children, invited him to a camp. Each boy was invited to take a stick from a pile of wood and throw it into an evening campfire as a sign of whatever burden he wanted to discard.

“Americo picked up the whole stack and, breaking down into tears, threw it into the fire,” said Billy Clark, a missionary who grew up in Peru and has lived in Pasadena, California and Fredricksburg, Virginia. Last year, he returned to Peru to work with street children. “A few days later, you could see the change in his face.”

Today, Americo is living at the Union Biblica’s shelter in Iquitos and helping to reach other young boys in similar circumstances.

There are an estimated forty million children working or living on the streets of Latin America, and a worldwide estimated total of one hundred million. These children eke out a living by begging, washing cars, selling candy and gum, carrying groceries, shining shoes and often turning to prostitution.

“The boys live in the marginal areas of Iquitos, mostly with single moms,” said Villacis. “The mothers work in the market and are poor, so they don’t have any money to put them into school or to feed them.

“The mothers who put the children out are often abused women who have been treated like garbage,” Clark said. “They have nothing so they have to put their child on the street. The first to go is the oldest boy. The girls are kept until the situation worsens. Many of the girls end up in prostitution, or at best as maids.”

“You can spot a street boy a mile away,” Clark reflected. “You can see their ragged clothing at a distance, they haven’t bathed in a month or two so they smell, and their teeth are bad.”

Clark said that the most telling sign is “the look in their eyes. They have a complete lack of trust and self esteem.”

The scene is repeated throughout the region. A band of homeless children, some of them as young as two years old, lives in Quito, Ecuador’s sprawling Carolina Park.

“There are three groups of children living in the park,” said Vinicio Gordon, an Ecuadorian who works with the children through his church, Sendero de la Cruz. “There are those who are between two and four years old, some of them living with their mothers. These children protect each other and especially try to help the youngest ones. The second group is those who are between five and ten, working together to wash windows or entertain people as fire-eaters. The third group, between ages 12 and 18, guard cars, shine shoes and sell gum and candy.”

Of the 200 million children and teen-agers in Latin American and the Caribbean, half are considered to be living in poverty and 10 percent work, according to UNICEF.

In Ecuador, which has 3.7 million children, nearly 900,000 are believed to be working--about half in the capital--where they shine shoes and sell newspapers for pocket change.



In Costa Rica, 150,000 children work in the countryside. In Chile - a relatively rich country - 125,000 children are estimated to be working.

But in many cases, child workers inhabit a much darker world - of prostitution, drugs or violence. In El Salvador, for example, human rights groups estimate that 800

underage girls work in brothels. And in Brazil, almost 70 percent of deaths among children are blamed on street violence.

Most street children (75 percent) have some family links, but spend most of their lives on the streets, according to the Costa Rican-based Casa Alianza, a Roman Catholic organization related to Covenant House. Most never go beyond a fourth-grade education.

The remaining 25 percent live in the streets, often in a group of other children. They sleep in abandoned buildings, under bridges, in doorways, or in public parks.

“If you don’t have some place to channel them, you lose them back to the streets,” said missionary Sue Leak of Muskegon, Michigan, who operates a shelter for homeless girls outside of Morelia, Mexico. “You lose them to drugs and prostitution and the addiction of relationships that aren’t good for them,” she said.

Violence is at the root of many children seeking shelter in the streets. “Six million children and adolescents are subjected to physical violence each year in Latin America,” said Alfredo Mora, a Costa Rican who is the Latin American director of Viva Network, a British-based Protestant umbrella organization working with children-at-risk. “In addition, 80,000 children worldwide die each year from various forms of violence in their own homes,” he said.

Violence is also a part of life on the street. “The police are very real threat to them,” said Margaret Roberts who was born in Wales but grew up in Argentina. Today, she works with a street children project in Mexico City. “They will take any opportunity beat them up.

Roberts adds. “They told me once that no girl has been on the street for more than two weeks before she has been violently raped by the police. The consequence is that the girls are the ones that drug up the most and they are the hardest to reach because they have been hardened.”

ON THE STREETS TO SURVIVE

Carlos is 16, his brother Diego is 10. They work on the streets of Quito each day for economic reasons. Without the income they generate by begging, their family would not be able to eat or stay in their meager house. The two boys work the streets outside fashionable shopping centers that ring Carolina Park. “We get here about 10 or 11 each morning,” Carlos explained. “We beg all day and then get home around 12:30 or 1:00 a.m.”

Some families will not allow their children to enter the house unless they have earned or begged four or five dollars. Children often end up sleeping on the streets if they have not earned enough money during the day, fearing what will happen if they return home short of the expected amount of money.

Children who have suffered so much that they choose living on the streets over staying in an abusive situation have special needs and are difficult to reach. “Most street kids I know are very wealthy,” Leak observed. “They just don’t know how to manage money. They will buy 30 ice cream cones in one day.” “They don’t really need the physical side of things, they want someone to care and to be committed to them. They want someone to take the time to say you’re worth it.”

Leak said that most of the street children she works with have no dreams for the future; they only are able to live for the present.

In addition, they have very little self-esteem. “A lot of kids don’t believe that you can love them just for who they are and they can’t love themselves. They don’t see themselves as worthy of having something good happen in their lives,” Leak observed.

At the center of street children’s struggle is a lack of trust said missionary Thomas Smoak who works at a Christian children’s center in Sao Paulo, Brazil. “In every case, the trust relationship between the child and the parents has been broken,” he said. “Street kids need a trusting, committed relationship to get their lives back together.”

RISKS

“The addiction that is hardest for the kids is mistaking sex for love,” Leak explained. “They’re involved in prostitution. They go through a feeling of being unloved and uncared for. Many have such a low self-esteem that they eventually go back to prostitution because it is the only place they feel valued.”

Prostitution and sexual abuse is common among street children. Bruce Harris, the Executive Director of Latin American Programs for Casa Alianza reports that at least five percent of Mexico City’s 50,000 street children are infected with HIV.

By establishing a home outside of the city, Leak believes that the children will be far enough away from the life on the streets that they can be rehabilitated and returned to a productive life. “We have found that the way to work with kids is to figure out how long they have been on the streets. A kid who has been there for six months is a different kid than one that’s been there for two years. You deal with them in a different way.”

The family is the key to getting a child permanently off of the street Smoak said. “The lack of a father figure is usually the main reason a child is working or living on the streets. Either the father is absent, in prison, or he is addicted to drugs or alcohol and turns violent.”

“Casa Alianza has developed a family reintegration program where we look to the family as part of the solution rather than solely the problem,” Harris said. “About 90% of the children reintegrated stay with the family.”

“It shows you how wrong we were when we used to evaluate the effectiveness of our program by the number of children we had in residential programs,” Harris said. “The best institution for the child is the family.”

Private agencies are at the forefront of efforts to reach street kids. “We know that there are between 20,000 and 25,000 (protestant) program sites across the world reaching about two million children in residential care,” explained Patrick McDonald, president of Viva Network. “There are another 20 million children in partial care, in slum programs, inoculation projects, after school care and so forth.”

Church involvement with troubled children “is probably larger than any other body,” he said. “UNICEF has a budget of a billion dollars a year. The Christian child care response is three times that, but its work is very unknown.”

Emphasizing the need to help children at risk, McDonald reflected, “Over three-billion children will be born in the next 25 years. What ever reach those kids will dictate what the next generation will look like. Whatever wins their affection and allegiance, and something will, will determine the shape of the world.”

Related websites

Viva Network: www.viva.org

Casa Alianza: www.casa-alianza.org

UNICEF: www.unicef.org

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