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***Street children and political violence: A socio-demographic analysis of street children in Rwanda***

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## Keywords

Street children; Africa; political violence; demographic profile; Rwanda

## ***Street children and political violence: A socio-demographic analysis of street children in Rwanda***

### Abstract

**Objective:** The aims were (1) to examine the profile of African street children and to assess the link between street children in Africa and political violence (2) to undertake a systematic examination of causal factors of street children in post-genocide Rwanda (3) to situate this analysis in the context of the socio-cultural and political impact of the genocide on Rwandan communities.

**Method:** Observational mapping examined the profile and activities of Rwandan street children. Structured interviews were carried out with 290 children in four regional towns to obtain information on socio-demographic, familial, educational background, causal factors surrounding street life involvement, psychological well-being and relationship to the street. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews examined the relationship between street children and the broader Rwandan society.

**Results:** Street children in Rwanda were predominantly adolescent boys, almost half of whom were homeless (42%), with a high proportion of orphaned children or children who had lost at least one parent. Two variables predicted homelessness: child's guardian and reason for being in street. Qualitative accounts of children conveyed the impact of death of family members, repatriation, imprisonment of parents and poverty on their lives.

**Conclusions:** The analysis highlighted the need for community based support for children in alternative guardianship care and for policies to support the reintegration of male youths in post-conflict welfare strategies as prevention strategies for street migration.

***Street children and political violence; A socio-demographic analysis  
of street children in Rwanda***

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Rwanda is associated with the images of the 1994 genocide. Some years later, the challenges facing the government, international organisations and civil society include acute poverty and the physical and psychological rehabilitation of community structures. Many categories of children continue to be regarded as vulnerable. These include children in centres, refugee and repatriated children, children in prison, and increasing numbers of street children.

Street life involvement is not an unknown phenomenon neither in developing (Aptekar, 1994; Bourdillon, 1994) nor in developed countries (Vissing & Wright, 1998; Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993). In Latin America, street children are generally a product of poverty and familial difficulties (Scanlon, Tomkins, Lynch, & Scanlon, 1998; Rizzini & Lusk, 1995). In some African countries, these factors are compounded by rapid change in traditional kin-based support systems (Suda, 1997). There has been less attention to the profile of street children in conflict and post-conflict contexts. In Rwanda, for example, while street children were evident on the streets of urban

centres pre-1994, there has been a rapid increase in the observed number of street working and homeless children since the genocide of 1994. This article examines the characteristics of Rwandan street children and situates the analysis in a socio-political and cultural framework. The violence of 1994 decimated community and family structures. According to Uvin (1998), Rwanda experienced no less than “the total and rapid destruction of a whole society” (p. 164). The authors argue that the Rwandan case highlights that it is not only poverty or family abuse but also the effects of conflict and displacement that have led to children’s street life involvement. Given the increasing number of conflicts and the greater involvement of civilian populations in these conflicts, it is important to explore the link between conflict and the creation of street children. The article briefly examines the literature on street children in Africa, then analyses the characteristics of Rwandan street children and assesses the relationship between ethno-political violence, post-conflict social relations and street children in Rwanda.

#### *Who are the African street children?*

The majority of street children in developing countries are actually street boys (Aptekar, 1994) and this has also been noted in Africa. In Zimbabwe, 95% of 520 children interviewed were boys (Muchini & Nyandiya-Bundy, 1991), as were 84% of Angolan street children (Moberly, 1999), 76% of Ethiopian street children (Veale, Aderfrsew, & Lalor, 1993), 70% of Zambian street children (Mambme, 1997) and nearly 100% of Sudanese street children (Veale, 1996). In South Africa, street children were typically black males, aged approximately 13 years (Le Roux, 1996).

The preponderance of boys on the street has been linked to socio-cultural factors. In Kenya, boys are socialised to become independent at a young age while girls are encouraged to stay at home (Aptekar 1997). Also, families refrain from sending girls to the street because of a fear of sexual abuse (Muchini & Nyandiya-Bundy, 1991). Cultural gender norms are also influential. In Sudan, where street children were almost exclusively male, the influence of Muslim culture in Khartoum meant it was inappropriate for girls to wander unaccompanied in the streets. In a study of street children in four regional towns in Ethiopia, the smallest proportion of street girls were

encountered in the town with the largest Muslim population (Veale, 1996). Also in Ethiopia, street girls employed a self-imposed nightly curfew to avoid sexual attack, where the average age of first experience of rape of street girls that had experienced sexual abuse was 13.8 years (Lalor, 1999).

The age profile of African street children varies between countries. Aptekar (1997) found that the mean age of 76 Kenyan street children was 12.6 years. In Ethiopia, of 1000 street children, the average age of initiation to the street was 11 years (Veale et al., 1993). In other African countries, the age profile has been found to be older. Of 520 Zimbabwean street children, about 60% were 14 years or older (Muchini & Nyandiya-Bundy, 1991). In Mauritania, the average age of street children was 14.2 years (Marguerat & Poitou, 1994). In Sudan, 60% of street boys were aged 13 years or over (Veale, 1996).

In general, homeless children account for a minority of African street children. In a sample of 520 Zimbabwean street children, 15% were homeless street children (Muchini & Nyandiya-Bundy, 1991). In Zambia, only 2% of street children interviewed were homeless (Tacon & Lungwangwa, 1992). In Ethiopia, age and gender differences were found in the proportion of homeless street children. A breakdown of 1000 children interviewed indicated 22% of street boys and 8% of street girls aged 5-11 years were homeless. Of those aged 13-15 years, 24% of boys and 12% of girls were homeless, as were 35% of boys and 23% of girls aged 16-18 year (Veale et al., 1993). In Zambia, Mambwe (1997) also reported gender differences. Their study found 50% of 30 street girls and 43% of boys lived with both parents, while 3% of girls and 36% of boys lived with friends on the streets .

With respect to the family structures of African street children, there is some evidence that the profile of street child families may be atypical within countries. In Sudan, the incidence of polygamy was higher among families of street children than was the statistical societal norm (Veale, 1996). In Angola, the proportion of female headed families of street children at 41%, was

higher than the norm for female headed households of 29% in urban areas (Moberly, 1999). In Kenya, while in the slums of Nairobi, nearly two thirds of the households are headed by unmarried women (Suda, 1993), 85% of street children are of female headed families (Onyango, Suda, & Orwa, 1991). In Ethiopia, Lalor (1999) found of a sample of 69 homeless street girls, only 16% came from a two parent household, 30% from a female headed household and the remainder lived in a variety of other guardian arrangements, such as with stepparents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbours and adopting families. He argued “Excepting dramatic events such as being orphaned, children would appear to be protected from the streets, at least initially, by alternative domestic arrangements” (p 763). This is interesting as traditional cultural social support systems, such as the movement of children between households, particularly in times of crisis, has not been systematically explored as a contributory factor to street life involvement in Africa.

Various factors have been used to explain the origins of street life involvement in African countries. The main ones are state of the economy, poverty, lack of educational opportunities (Mambwe, 1997; Sampa, 1997), rural to urban migration (Mambwe, 1997; Sampa, 1997) social changes, mainly linked to the weakening of family structures and family abuse (Aptekar, 1997; Mambwe, 1997; Sampa, 1997; Suda 1997), and displacement and Hiv/Aids (Suda, 1997). The dominant explanatory psychological frameworks have been in terms of poverty, social exclusion, cultural family dynamics and child rearing practices, street labour and family disharmony. In the capital cities of countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, poverty is the underlying dynamic pushing children to the street to work or to escape abuse at home. Children are initiated to the street at a relatively young age, are encouraged to be independent to help support the family economically through street work, and the majority maintain contact with their families (Aptekar, 1997; Mambwe, 1997; Sampa, 1997; Lalor, 1999). In regions affected by war and political violence, there is emerging evidence that the dynamics may be different.

*African street children and political violence*

Increasingly, researchers are focusing on the links between political violence and street children in Africa. Uvin (1998) makes a distinction between structural violence, which may be defined as violence by the state through discrimination, poverty, repression and profound racism and physical acts of violence. Both forms of violence have the effect of breaching children's human rights. In South Africa for example, structural violence existed in the former policy of apartheid, in which society was discriminated along racial lines. This was argued to be central to the fact it was black children, predominantly males that formed the street child population in that country (Smith, 1998; Swart, 1988). Veale (1996) found that civil unrest and displacement was one causal factor for the origin of street children in Sudan. In addition, in displacement camps, cultural practices of wife inheritance after paternal death left many children vulnerable to leaving home for the streets (Veale, 1996). Civil unrest dated from the Mau Mau struggle has also been connected with the rise of street children in Kenya (Nowrojee, 1990; in Aptekar, 1994). War and political violence was also linked to the presence of children on the streets in urban areas in Northern Ethiopia (Veale et al., 1993) and in Angola (Moberly, 1999). These factors are combined in many instances. Aptekar (1994) hypothesised that one reason for the great number of Kikuyu street children in Nairobi could be the rapid modernisation of the family due to men having being incarcerated during independence and women having to take on roles formerly associated to those of the husbands.

In post-conflict contexts, there is some evidence that a disproportionate number of street children come from families in which one or both parents are dead. In Rwanda, Comrade (1998) found a large proportion of children lived alone (42%) or with peers (19%). Only 11% lived with both parents, 20% with father, and 8% with mother. This is dramatically highlighted in the case of Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, it was found that, in the towns of Addis Ababa, Nazareth, and Bahir Dar, 42%, 47% and 37% respectively of street children were from two parent families, compared to 24% of children in Mekele, the regional capital of Tigray, a region affected by nearly 30 years of civil conflict. The proportion of orphans (both parents dead) was significantly higher in Mekele, 20% compared to 8%, 4%, and 7% in Addis Ababa, Nazareth and Bahir Dar. Furthermore, the



percentage of homeless children in Mekele was 51%, compared to 22%, 18% and 10% in the other towns respectively (Veale et al., 1993). Qualitative reports of Mekele children highlighted the effect of the civil war, and in particular, parental death, on children's movement to street life.

In Angola, in the aftermath of civil conflict, tracing and reunification programmes, it was found that boys were more vulnerable than girls to moving to the street. In particular, communities were more protective of girls. In times of overwhelming family crisis, girls were more likely than boys to be placed in children's homes by family members, while boys were more likely to survive as they could or move to the street (Moberly, 1999). In Mozambique, Nordstrom (1997) noted girls and boys were subjected to the same conditions that forced children to live on the street, such as witnessing their entire village homes destroyed, yet street children were almost always boys. She hypothesised girls were more easily forced into prostitution and child labour. She commented "While the *presence* of homeless boys on the street is a constant reminder of the tragedy of war, the *absence* of the girls is another" (p 173, italics in original).

These studies give some indication that the dynamics responsible for the movement of children to street life in contexts of political violence may be different to those of other countries, where the factors are linked to poverty, child labour, familial abuse and neglect. The following sections undertakes a systematic examination of the processes related to the creation of street children in post-genocide Rwanda.

#### *The Rwandan genocide: Impact on children, families, communities*

The presence of children living and working on the streets in Rwanda is not a new phenomenon. Some of the most established programmes for street children were initiated in the early 1980s. Key informant interviews in these centres indicated that pre-1990, street children were mainly children who left rural regions to come to the town to work. These child migrants were typical of children in the street throughout Africa; they arrived in the city and began working in the informal economy, attaching themselves in more structured ways to the business community, thus

becoming integrated in the urban economy. In the period 1990-1993, civil unrest in the northern provinces of Rwanda culminated in the movement of large numbers of people to the capital city, Kigali. This contributed to a rise in the presence of children on the street and an evidenced change in the profile of street children. The genocide of 1994 marked the culmination in this process. It is difficult to estimate the numbers of street children in Rwanda, and any estimate is likely to be unreliable. In August 1996, The Ministry of Social Affairs (MINITRASO) estimated that there were 2,670 children working or living on the streets throughout the country, based on observations by social workers. In 1999, the numbers were estimated at about 6,000 (United Nations Common Country Assessment, 1999).

In the period 1994-1997, Rwandan society experienced profound upheaval that dramatically changed the socio-demographic profile of the country. Between April-July 1994, between 800,000 and one million Tutsi and moderate Hutus were killed. In the aftermath of the genocide, the victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front heralded the return of almost one million Rwandan Tutsi diaspora in exile. In addition, almost 2 million people left Rwanda as refugees. In November 1996, the country witnessed the massive forced repatriation of over one million of these refugees. Through the late 1990's, civil conflict continued in the north-west of the country. Since the 1990's the numbers of households living in destitute poverty has increased (Oxfam UK, 1999). Whereas 40% of the population was below the poverty line in 1985, 90% were below it in 1997 (United Nations Common Country Assessment, 1999). In Rwanda's predominantly rural society, land shortages and lack of economic and human resources contribute significantly to difficult life conditions and since the genocide, there has been a high incidence of land disputes which exasperate familial and community tensions (United Nations Common Country Assessment, 1999). These experiences of conflict and its aftermath have deeply affected the civilian population and social relations in communities. Smith (1998) noted that 70% of survivors are women. He quotes the view of one woman to Nowrojee (1996) that "Widows are without families, without houses, without money...We become crazy"(in Smith, 1998, p 751) Post-

genocide, female headed families accounted for one third of households compared to a quarter in pre-genocide times. Over 100,000 adults, mainly men were in detention on charges of genocide.

Children have borne the brunt of these political, social and demographic changes. With 48% of Rwanda's population of 7 million aged 16 years or under, the majority of children who were in Rwanda during the genocide were exposed to brutalising violence, either as witnesses, victims and even perpetrators (African Rights Watch, 1995). For 40,000 children in child-headed households, family structures ceased to exist altogether in their previous form (World Vision, 1998). Inside Rwanda, the number of centres for unaccompanied children increased dramatically in the year following the genocide, from 37 orphanages which catered for about 4,800 children before the genocide, to a peak of 77 centres receiving 12,704 children in April 1997. In May 2000, less than 5,000 children remained in centres. Approximately 70,000 children were formally reunified or fostered. In total, it is estimated 120,000 children live outside their family of origin in extended families or substitute family care (UNICEF, 2000).

It is in this context that there has been an observed increase in the numbers of street children in Rwandan cities and towns. Suda (1997) has argued that transitions in traditional care systems for children in African countries is contributory to the creation of street children. In Rwanda, it is tempting to believe that a strong civil society pre-genocide was then obliterated by violence. In fact, Uvin (1998) argues that society was hierarchically organised through authoritarian Government structures, civil society was weak and civil responsibility did not extend beyond the family system. However, there is evidence that these systems worked for the support of children. Prior to the events of 1994, children in need of care were absorbed by extended kinship systems as seen in the relatively small number of children in institutional care. In Rwandan culture, family is defined by blood relations but close friends may also become members of the family through the practice of *Kunywana*, which means "to cut and drink blood". If the agreement were broken, punishment from nature would follow. In recent times, the exchange of a cow has become the symbol of long lasting union between families. The care of children is traditionally carried out by

family members in the wider sense of the word (Donà, Kalinganire, & Muramutsa, 2001). In the event of parental death, responsibility for children is traditionally secured by the father's side of the family, in line with the patriarchal nature of Rwandan society. Since the genocide, the numbers of orphans, separated children and child headed households have placed enormous strain on these systems of care. The question addressed here is what is the relationship between these socio-political and demographic changes and the creation of street children.

## **Method**

Fieldwork was undertaken in four towns in Rwanda from July to September 1997, selected on the basis of geographical distribution and their importance as regional towns. These were Kigali, the capital city, Butare, in the south, Byumba, in the north east and Kibungo in the south east. Byumba and Kibungo were selected as both provinces share a border with Tanzania, and served as a reception point for returning refugees.

In Rwanda, the term *mayibobo* is commonly used to refer to unaccompanied children working or living in the streets. In developing a sampling strategy, key informants, the research team and street children were asked what they understood by the term *mayibobo*. Most respondents included a number of different elements in their definition. The most commonly occurring element was "A child without any address, who lives and sleeps anywhere he finds". The second most frequently occurring element was "A child who has no adult to take care of him." In all, 66% of 110 key informants used one of these elements as the core part of their definition. A quarter of respondents included some element of anti-social behaviour in their definition. A youth working in the informal market economy who has a stable job and relationship with parents, who takes care of his or her appearance was not generally considered a *mayibobo* (street child). This indicates that the perception of the *mayibobo* in Rwanda is a homeless, orphaned or aimless child, one without a guardian, without a regular job, and therefore at risk of engaging in anti-social activities. It was agreed that, for the purposes of sampling, the definition of a *mayibobo* is an individual under 18 years, who may be working in the street, begging for food or just hanging around, and

who is unaccompanied by an adult or guardian. The research took place between July-September 1998. Observational mapping was carried out in all the research towns from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. to map the places street children congregate and to understand the profile, work and activities of street children at different times of the day. It was not possible to conduct fieldwork late at night for security reasons.

The research team included 12 street educators, social work students and older street youth. Two hundred and ninety children were interviewed to obtain information on socio-demographic, familial, educational background, causal factors surrounding street life involvement, psychological well being and relationship to the street. A structured interview schedule with open and closed questions, lasting approximately 30 minutes, was developed, pre-tested and administered in Kinyarwanda. Areas selected for sampling were based on the mapping exercise of where street children hung out, such as a dumping ground, market areas, public recreational spaces, roundabouts, and the town bus station. Sampling was ad hoc and interviews were carried out on Monday's to Saturdays, between 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. Children were approached randomly and interviews were conducted in quiet areas off the main markets and in coffee shops. The presence of older street youth and street educators as part of the research team facilitated gaining the cooperation of children. In total, 139 children were interviewed in Kigali, 58 in Byumba, 54 in Kibungo, and 39 in Butare. Of the sample 91% were males and 9% were females. Butare was the last research site and it coincided with a Government round up of street children who were placed in a newly designated Government centre for street children to await family reunification or residential education. At this point, children on the street were suspicious, and chose not to participate. Permission was obtained to access the Government centre and the majority of the 39 children in Butare were interviewed in the centre.

Reliability was gauged by comparing the final sample profile with observation records from the observational mapping. Observation schedules recorded 93% males and 7% females, with the percentage of girls on the street decreasing during the day. Between 6 a.m. and 4 p.m., 5-7% of

the children observed were girls, and by 6 p.m. observation sheets recorded exclusively boys. Focus group discussions with street girls highlighted fear of sexual assault as the core reason they did not remain on the street at night. The high incidence of sexual fear may reflect real risks but may also be linked to the country's recent social history, with women being raped during the genocide, sometimes in public places (Rwandan Ministry of Health, 1997). Methodologically, the validity of the information has been checked through triangulation (interviews, observations and focus group discussions).

## **Results**

*Age of sample* The mean age of the 290 children sampled was 14.2 years (S.D. =2.5). Nearly half of the sample, 47%, was aged 15 years or over. Chi square analysis comparing children aged 13 years and younger to older children (aged 14 years and above) revealed older children were on the streets for a longer period of time ( $\chi^2=6.70$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and their guardian was more likely to be living outside the town of interview ( $\chi^2=7.21$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In addition, older children were significantly more likely to have experienced the death of their mother ( $\chi^2=6.48$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

*When children came to the streets* Overall, 87% of children first came to the streets after the genocide of 1994. Nearly half of children (49%) reported they were initiated to the street after 1994, and a third more (38%) came to the street after November 1996 (the time of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees repatriation of refugees). Only 13% were on the street pre April 1994. This is consistent with a 1996 study of street children in Kigali which found that 90% of children were initiated to the streets in the aftermath of 1994 (Munderere, 1996).

Chi square analysis was carried out to examine the characteristics of children who came to the street in the period 1994-1996 and post 1996 (after large scale repatriation). No significant difference was found in the profile of the two groups of children on a variety of variables including gender, reason on street, guardian, sleeping place, where parent or guardian lives, father alive, mother alive, and when father and mother died. Children on the street pre 1996 had

significantly greater experience of having lived in a children's centre for some period (unaccompanied centre, orphanage, street child centre), ( $\chi^2=8.69$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.005$ ). On mental health variables, one variable emerged as significant and children on the street pre-1996 experienced more nightmares than children who came to the street at a later period ( $\chi^2=9.67$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Multivariate analysis yielded no additional information therefore this is not reported.

*Family structure* Of the 290 children interviewed, 33% reported that both parents were dead, and another 4% did not know the whereabouts of both parents. Less than a quarter had both parents alive (22%). Twenty seven percent reported their father was dead and mother alive, and 7% had mother dead and father alive. In addition, 2% did not know the whereabouts of their father although their mother was alive, 3% did not know the whereabouts of their mother but had a surviving father, and 2% reported their father was dead and they did not know where their mother was.

*Guardianship* Children were asked to cite who their guardian was. A third of children (33%) reported having no guardian, 24% cited mother only, 11% both parents, 9% a sibling, 7% father only, 7% other relative or neighbour, 9% other (e.g. a peer). Children who responded 'no guardian' or 'no one' included some orphaned children, and also children who had a surviving parent(s) or guardian but were sleeping in the street.

Given that Rwandan children sometimes reside with a guardian other than parent, it was found that guardian arrangements did not correspond unilaterally with whether biological parents were alive or dead. For example, in cases where the child had one surviving parent ( $n=99$ ), in cases of maternal bereavement with a surviving father, 48% of children cited their father as guardian, 19% cited a sibling, 10% a relative as their guardian and 24% said 'no-one.' If the mother was the surviving parent, 68% of children cited her as guardian, 1% a sibling, 6% another relative, 4% other, and 19% 'no one.'

Of the 33% of children who reported both parents were dead, 14% cited a sibling as guardian, 11% cited a relative, and 16% a neighbour or other adult. Half (52%) of orphaned children cited having no guardian.

*Origin* Children were asked whether their family or guardian resided in the town of interview, outside the town, either in the same Prefecture or a different Prefecture. Regional differences emerged across the four towns. In Kigali, 50% of children had guardian in the town of interview, 30% in Kibungo, 26% in Butare, and 10% in Byumba. In Kibungo, Butare, and Kigali had the highest proportion of children who migrated to the town from other Prefectures (38%), indicating the capital exerts a pull on children from all over Rwanda, and particularly from rural areas. A further 2% said their parent/guardian was in prison or in exile outside the country, and 9% said they had 'no information' about their guardian.

Chi square analysis comparing children with family/guardian in the town of interview with those elsewhere indicated that a higher proportion of children from elsewhere were boys ( $\chi^2=6.11$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ), a higher proportion were sleeping on the street ( $\chi^2=26.16$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and significantly fewer were attending school ( $\chi^2=7.67$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In addition, a significant association was found between guardians' living place and reason child is on street ( $\chi^2=29.87$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and child's guardian ( $\chi^2=27.14$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p<.001$ ). On mental health indicators, a greater proportion of children with guardian outside the town of interview experienced nightmares "often" or "sometimes" compared to children with a guardian in the town ( $\chi^2=10.88$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

*Status with respect to the street* Children who sleep in the street environment every night comprised 42% of the sample, 54% of street children slept every or nearly every night in the house of a family member or guardian, 1% slept in a children's centre, and 3% in an other arrangement (e.g., a house/structure with peers).



Chi square analysis was carried out to compare the characteristics of children who sleep mainly at home with homeless children. More homeless children were boys ( $\chi^2=5.34$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.05$ ), had family/guardian living outside the town of interview ( $\chi^2=15.45$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ), had experienced the death of their mother ( $\chi^2=9.04$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.005$ ), had lived in a children's centre, such as an unaccompanied centre, orphanage, or street child centre ( $\chi^2=9.80$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and were not attending school ( $\chi^2=10.11$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.005$ ). In addition, a significant association was found between where the child sleeps and reason child is on street ( $\chi^2=59.66$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and when mother died ( $\chi^2=12.95$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<.05$ )

Multivariate logistical regression analysis was conducted to determine which variables best predicted homelessness, operationalised as the child reports to sleep on the street every night. Demographic variables (age, gender, town of interview, reason, guardian, sleeping place, where parent/guardian lives, father alive, when father died, mother alive, when mother died, live in children's centre) were investigated. These variables were all categorical in nature. The results yielded two demographic variables as significant predictors of homelessness. These were who is the child's guardian and reason for being on the street. With respect to guardian, children who cited their mother as guardian had significantly lower odds of being homeless compared to those who cited no guardian (OR=51.49, 95% CI (15.35, 172.73),  $p<.001$ ), father as guardian (OR=3.64, 95% CI (1.04, 12.69),  $p<.05$ ), sibling as guardian (OR=4.15, 95% CI (1.3, 13.26),  $p<.05$ ) or other relative/neighbour, although this was of borderline significance (OR=3.46, 95% CI (1.004, 11.896),  $p<.49$ ). Interestingly, there was no significant difference in the odds of homelessness between both parents as guardian and mother as guardian. With respect to reason on street, the analysis indicated increased odds of homelessness for those who cited disharmony with family/guardian (OR=7.07, 95% CI (2.88, 17.38),  $p<.001$ ) and for those who left the countryside/lost their job or were attracted to the street compared to those who cited poverty (OR=5.49, 95% CI (2.20, 13.72),  $p<.001$ ).

*Causal factors of street life involvement* Children's qualitative responses highlighted the complex relationship between violence and the impact on families and children.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

In summary, economic factors were cited by 38% of children as responsible for their street life involvement, 26% cited family/guardian difficulties, 18% a lack of guardian, 18% cited factors related to perceived benefits of the street, and 9% "because my parents are dead." Children's stories were complex. An analysis of the qualitative data (Table 1) indicates that the majority of children were precipitated to the street by changes in family structure, such as the loss of one parent or both parents, parent remarriage, children becoming unaccompanied, children fostered in another family, or the closure of an unaccompanied children's centre rendering the child homeless. Parental death brought with it a myriad of economic and social changes. Children told how "My father and other relatives were killed and my mother remarried. Since that time, I have taken care of surviving for myself." Another typical response was "My father died during the war. I returned home, accompanied by a neighbour, they beat me and I immediately came to the street." Children's responses on psychological indicators also highlighted the difficult times children had experienced. Of the 290 street children interviewed, and asked how often they experienced various psychological symptoms, bad memories (60%), nightmares (42%), headaches (63%) and being worried or anxious (44%) were reported as experienced by children "often" or "sometimes."

## **Discussion**

The findings of the study show that the profile of Rwandan street children is different from that of street children in other African countries in some important ways that reflect the recent history and social changes of Rwanda, and in particular the role of civil conflict and consequent socio-cultural changes.

The profile of Rwandan street children is that they are predominantly adolescent boys, almost all of whom (87%) have left their hill of origin after the 1994 genocide, almost half of whom are homeless (42%), and two thirds (67%) have experienced the loss of at least one parent. Some features differentiate the profile of Rwandan street children from that of other countries. In particular, these are the high incidence of children sleeping on the street, the older age profile of children than typically found in some African countries, and the impact of disrupted social networks in immediate and extended care systems due to death, imprisonment or exile of parents and relatives in pushing children to the street.

One of the most significant factors differentiating the profile of Rwandan street children from that of other contexts is the high proportion of orphaned children (33%) and that nearly half of children (44%) who sleep on the street reported they had no parents or guardian and were effectively 'family-less.' Few figures are available from other countries that explicitly compare the characteristics of children who sleep in the street compared to home based children. Baker, Panter-Brick, & Todd (1997) found 8% of street-sleeping Nepalese street children were orphans compared to no home based street children. In Honduras, only 5% of homeless children were found to be "true orphans" (Wright, Kaminsky, & Witting, 1993). The closest profile is that of Mekele, Ethiopia mentioned earlier, which was similarly a post-conflict context and was characterised by a high proportion of homeless children and a high percentage of orphans.

Perhaps the most significant social impact of genocide has been on family structures. Thousands of children were catapulted out of their family of origin into alternative guardianship care. Street children sampled here reported a complex variety of guardianship arrangements. Research examining the care of reunified and fostered children in Rwandan communities has found that children grapple with complex negotiations around issues of identity, grief and loss, and the child's position in the family (Veale, Quigley, Ndibeshye, & Nyirimihigo, 2001; Donà et al., 2001). These issues are also expressed in Rwandan proverbs. *Umwana w'undi abishya inkonda* - A child of someone else is difficult/A child of somebody else is not like one's own (Dion, 1971).

In communities, adults sometimes found children's behaviour "difficult" because of trauma or because of adaptation difficulties after having lived in a children's centre (Veale et al., 2001). Qualitative accounts of street children indicated some children in guardianship care associated punishment with being unloved and unwanted, thus precipitating them to the street.

A significant feature of the Rwandan street child profile is the finding that approximately half of street children are 15 years or older, and of these the majority are male. This may be related to the challenge posed by large numbers of unaccompanied children post-genocide. Non-government organisations (NGO's) reported more difficulties in reintegrating unaccompanied male adolescents back into communities compared to younger children or girls. For example, one agency found that, of 36 families that passed strict criteria to register as foster parents, 19 families declined to accept boys (Veale et al., 1999). Issues around inheritance rights, concerns about behavioural difficulties and the difficulty for boys in assuming a dependent position in a new structure result in families being reluctant to absorb adolescent boys in their family.

In Rwanda's patriarchal structure, the genocide has significantly broken down extended paternal support networks as a result of the death or imprisonment of so many men. This has resulted in the creation of large numbers of female and child headed families who are economically very vulnerable. Qualitative reports of children demonstrate this has been a factor pushing children to the street, and the impact of this may have been felt especially by adolescent boys. Furthermore, under Rwanda's patriarchal system following maternal remarriage, responsibility for children of the first marriage traditionally lies with paternal uncles rather than with the new husband. Adolescent boys are vulnerable to being pushed to early independence as a result.

The profile of Rwandan street children reflects the broader changes that Rwanda has witnessed in the last five years. Before 1994 Rwanda was characterised by a tight administrative structure and by the sedentary nature of a mainly agricultural population. People were discouraged to move from area of the other with the risk of losing education and health benefits. The population had as

a point of reference the hill, which represented not only a geographical but also a social world. Changes to the demographic and social fabric of the country as a result of the genocide have been enormous as a result of displacement and resettlement. During the genocide and subsequent conflict, houses were destroyed while others were given by the government to the one million Rwandan returnees. Demographic change is ongoing as the present policy of the government is to relocate people from the hills into villages. In the north west, for instance, over 500 sites have been allocated for the relocation of 650,000 internally displaced.

These factors have had significant material, socio-cultural and psychological repercussions. The fundamental implications of these demographic factors for many street children is; what is 'home,' what constitutes 'family,' and what is 'community?' As qualitative accounts of their experience narrate, many unaccompanied and orphaned children ended up in the streets. These are now adolescents who have no place to go to, or importantly, no where they want to go to. Accommodation, especially in urban areas, is a social problem. They may not have a house or parents in their hill anymore; many do not have families or a guardian nearby, and they cannot afford to pay rent to live independently.

The quality of relationships in communities of origin has been severely affected by the conflict and genocide. It is still very difficult to explain how widespread the genocide was, touching 153 out of 154 communes. Members of the same family, friends and neighbours killed each other. One informant commented that the paradox of the genocide was that the friends with whom you had been drinking on the 1 of April would be after you to kill you on the fifth and some whom you did not know very well would save you. Lack of identification with and trust in the community might be one psychological factor contributing to why some adolescents may not be interested to stay in, or return to their community of origin.

The findings reported here have a number of important implications for intervention. It is interesting to note that indigenous responses to the support and protection of street children in

Rwanda stem from models of the care of children in emergency situations. Government strategies have been to gather children in street child in residential centres to receive education and await reunification, which is reminiscent of approaches to the care of unaccompanied children in the aftermath of the genocide. At a National Conference on Street Children in December 1998, reunification and social reintegration with family or extended family was regarded as a primary objective for homeless street children, again similar to objectives for the long term protection of unaccompanied children. However, Munderere (1996) found two thirds (67%) of children wanted to live in a centre, 31% in a family, and 2% the street. This highlights concerns about the role of institutional care in post-conflict settings in creating expectations which actually makes the community reintegration of children more difficult (Bracken & Petty, 1998; Tolfree, 1995). The question that automatically suggests itself is; 'reunification' with whom, and 'social reintegration' to what structures? Overall, this examination of the situation of street children in Rwanda highlights important issues in child protection both in the aftermath of conflict. In particular, it highlights the need for community-based follow up support of reintegrated children in various guardianship arrangements and policies for the support and integration of male youth, a group commonly overlooked in post-conflict welfare strategies.

## **Conclusion**

An understanding of the phenomenon of street life involvement illuminates the broader changes that Rwanda has witnessed in the last 5 years. At a micro-level they reflect the broader social and cultural challenges of a country recovering from genocide and internal conflict. The information given by the children indicates that rather than poverty, urbanisation, or modernity, it is conflict, death and displacement that constitute the roots of street life involvement in Rwanda. While poverty and conflict are integrally mixed, it is argued here that it is the effects of civil conflict, and the human, material, social and cultural losses that stem from conflict, that is fundamental to the experience of Rwandan street children.

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