

Problems of Street Working Children in Iran and Preventive Crime Policy

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This paper is going to discuss about the problems and a risk of criminal involvement that street working children facing in Iran. The work environment of street working children imposes them upon insecure position and different types of violence, whereas they are typically more susceptible to join a criminal network or street gangs than other groups. This paper tries to find out the significant relationship between street working children and crime and show how they are in danger of criminal activities. The main objective of the study is to assess the risk factors and problems of street working children in Iran. Eventually, by analyzing the implementation of government policies on organizing street working children in Iran, the authors tried to propose the suitable preventive policy.

Keywords: child labour, preventive crime policy, street working children

Street working children in this paper refer to the child under the age of 18 who is forced to work in the streets to continue his survival. Living in the streets, lack of access to health centers, poverty, physical and sexual abuse, and lack of family and community support harm these children. In particular, access to cheap or even free drugs expose them to join criminal gangs. Generally, the mortality rate among these children is nine to 31 times more than expected (Abdi, Ramezankhani, & Yazdkhasti, 2016).

Increasing Number of Street Working Children

The recent economic situation of Iran and ineffectiveness of current policies can be considered as the main cause of increasing street working children. Currently, there is not any official statistics available about poverty line in Iran. The latest news published by Young Journalist Club in 2018 estimates the relative poverty line 40,000,000 Rials and the minimum wage 9,300,000 Rials. The evidence shows the minimum wage is a quarter of the poverty line. Accordingly, more than 60% of Iranian workers are living under the absolute poverty line.

Other statistics indicate that there is a relationship between the growth of poverty and increase in the number of working children, the street working children being included in this category as well. Table 1 compares poverty line, minimum wage, number of poor, and number of working children between year 2007 and 2017.

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As you see in this table, during the 10 years, the number of poor doubled and as a result, the number of street children got double as well. We decide to trust on unofficial statistics about poverty live, number of poor, and number of street and child labor as it is close to reality. As you can see according to the official statistics the inflation rate decreases within five years, the poverty line and the number of street children increase! And how this can be possible while all other indicators in regards to economic situation of people is worsen and below the standard line! Therefore, most of the researchers do not rely and trust on official statistics in this specific field which is more incredible and far from reality.

Table 1

Increasing the Number of Street Children Along With Poverty Line

Year	Whole population	Unemployment rate	Poverty line*	Minimum wage	Number of poor*	Approximate number of street and child labor*
2007	70,495,782	12/3	2,300,000 R	1,060,000 R	Absolute: 10 million	1.5 million
					Relative: 16 million	
2017	79,926,270	11/9	40,000,000 R	9,300,000 R	Absolute: 15 million	3 million
					Relative: 30 million	

Notes. * These are unofficial statistics provided by Young Journalist Club. Source: Statistical Centre of Iran.

The high rate of poverty forces many children to work, for instance in Tehran, around 75.3% of street children work for aiding family income, 33.3% for personal income, 13.7% for unsuitable living environment (Vameghi et al., 2013). In addition to economic causes, one of the outcomes of the ineffective policies can be the evidence of increasing the number of street working children.

Problems of Street Working Children and the Risk of Criminal Involvement

Hardly a week passes without any news about child harassment in Tehran's daily newspapers. Although, Tehran was chosen as a regional secretariat for the "child-friendly"¹ city in 2009 (Rastegar & Bertrando, 2016), according to NGOs report in many cases, current life condition for these vulnerable groups is below the minimum international standards:

(1) No access to education: Children deprived of education have been one of the major concerns of Iranian child activists for many years. This concern applies to worse forms of child labors and street children who work in the small town or in the middle of a big city. According to the newsletter published by society for protecting the rights of child (IRSPRC, 2016)², 4000 children in Iran do not have national identification³ and it means that these children live illegally (Abdi et al., 2016) and have no right to access education. Moreover, referring to the latest official statistics in 2015⁴, approximately 156,000, and unofficially 3,600,000 of school age children are out of school and 11% of them were child labor (Boshnavayi, 2016).

¹ This plan was introduced referring to the third national development plan of Iran by Tehran municipal council but it never finished, they had to stop the plan because of these limitations: Inadequate support of Tehran Municipality; Independent policies of police force in Tehran.

² The society for protecting the rights of children is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization and one the most active NGO in the field of street working children that founded in 1994.

³ These children are mainly the children of immigrants who illegally entered in Iran, for instance from Afghanistan, Pakistan and so on and so forth.

⁴ Although, according to Iranian labour news agency affiliated to government the number of children out of school is just 2,000 and only 1,400 of them are Illiterate mentioned by their interview with the person in charge of state welfare organization.

Those parents who do not care about the education of their child send them to work instead of school. The backdrop behind is the fact that it is much easier for children to earn money in the street than their elders. The illiteracy of parents is the other reason for exploitation of these children (Mohammadi, 2007). What lead to parents' recklessness about the education of their child are the lack of proper law enforcement and inadequate attention of the responsible sector, in child activist's point of view. However, the state welfare organization of Iran and some NGOs such as the house of knowledge, Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society, Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and many others support street working, but they are not enough to meet the needs of total deprived children (SWOI, 2012).

(2) Addiction: Addiction is one common problem among street working children. Children can be contaminated through two channels: (a) the addiction of their parents; and (b) living and working on the street and being the baits of addicts who are loitering around (Khosroshahi, 2012). Referring to the Newsletters of Society for Supporting Children's Rights, Bahar Newspaper ("on September 2014, Page 4") published that around 13.5% of children between the ages of 15 to 19 are coping with addiction (Newsletters of Society for Supporting Children's Rights, 2014).

In addition, some of these children even work with the gangs who deal drugs. The studies proved that in many cases street working children were the victims of trafficking (Alipour, 2009). Trafficking in organs by addict's gangs is the other example of risk facing to street children explained by Alipour. In this case, the criminal gangs kidnapped children, anesthetized them, and then separated the organs from their bodies (Alipour, 2009).

(3) Health problem: Outbreaks of infectious disease among street working children is a case mentioned recently by one of the member of the health committee of Iranian parliament. Nevertheless, this is not a new story published by one of the domestic Iranian newspaper⁵, this is an old problem existing among street working children and now it has become more serious. The prevalence of contagious disease among street working children also can lead to a social dilemma. Many of these children are suffering from different kinds of diseases and the survival of those children is dim (Izadkhah, 2011).

These health problems happen in a condition that usually those children suffer from exhaustion as well (De la Barra, 1998). Some of these diseases are results of work related accidents especially for the children who work in the underground. Following to these facts, the street working children are highly susceptible to dangerous diseases (Azar, 2012).

(4) Malnutrition: It is one of the most widespread problems among street working children which is a direct outcome of poverty. According to the information provided by Institution of social studies and researches of Iran, 34.7% of street working children are in starvation (Vameghi, Dejman, Rafiei, & Roshanfekar, 2013). Khariri-Hassan, Khodabakhshi Koolaei, and Taghvaei (2016), in a research conducted on street children found that bad living condition, hunger, and inappropriate nutrition is one factor that with many others leads to high-risk behaviors, such as suicide and self-harm.

(5) No parent or supervisor: Having no parents as much as can be counted in the lists of cause and reason, which can be known as a serious problem. Studies assume two groups of child without parents: unsupervised children and badly supervised children (Asghar, Mahnaz, & Tahereh, 2015). The first group normally includes those who have no parents (orphans) or their parents left them. The second group consists of those who escape

⁵ Published by "shargh" newspaper in 2012 available at <http://www.sharghnewspaper.ir>.

from their home because of bad supervision or any other reasons. According to statistics, near 29.3% of working children's parents are divorced or separated without legal divorcing processing and 3.6% of them are without supervisor (Vameghi et al., 2013).

Some of these children live in "state welfare organization of Iran". Their residential period is divided into short-term or long-term depending of the reason they brought about. As a matter of facts, these children need to work in the street and will do anything to survive, having no other choice. Lack of loyal parents who help these children and teach them how to live or stay away joining criminal activities is one feasible problem that these children confront currently (Ardebili, 2003). The data provided by Institution of Social studies and researches of IRAN indicate that nearby 18.8% of working children's parents have jail experiences (Vameghi et al., 2013). Hence, the living environment that they evolve might normalize illegal criminal activities.

(6) Physical and mental hurts: These problems refer to the types of working condition that street working children are doing. For instance, what kind of respect is waiting for a waste picker child? They might be humiliated, insulted, and mentally hurt (Khariri-Hassan et al., 2016). For the reason that not only they do not touch a little kindness or emotional support or care, but also their working condition lessens their pride, self-confidence, and their character. The study shows 62% of them were victims of violence in their families (Vameghi et al., 2013).

In addition to more than 60 percent of girls in the first week of their living in the street that are victims of sexual abuse (Abdi et al., 2016), there are other types of physical hurt threatening their life. Diseases such as attention deficit, social disorder, eye, heart, skin are some examples of this physical hurt. Table 2 shows the case study of 4,133 street working children on 2007 by Iranian students' news agency.

Table 2

Disease Facing to Street Children

Number of street children (sample group)	Eye disease	Respiratory disease	Heart disease	Hearing impairment	Attention deficit & social disorder	Skin diseases	Speaking & learning problem
4,133	73%	61%	64%	69%	61%	82%	61%

Note. Source: ISNA 2007.

Although these are not the entire problems that these children are dealing with a daily work, this alarming table indicates that at least more than half of street working children are suffering from different kinds of diseases.

The Relationship Between Street Working Children and Crime

The persistent presence of a working child in the street has two aspects: first, a non-conforming presented in a setting that is completely inappropriate; second, absence in a normal environment for growth such as home with family, school, and neighborhood to have a proper upbringing with their peers. These circumstances not only are depriving the child from a proper growth, but also are starting for a growth in an incongruous setting (Farahani & Babaei, 2016).

Gradually the street working child grows accustomed to the pattern of earning money on the street and they feel responsible to keep doing it (Azar, 2012). Acquiring money in any form will become a natural thing and in a way they are inclined to earn money at any cost (even a misdemeanor). Therefore, they will be good prey for criminal bands to hunt. That is then how a child gets accustomed to commit delinquency and even

assume it as a part of his right. According to the data provided by the Institution of Social studies and researches of IRAN, 27.4% of street working children are offended and arrested by police force (Vameghi et al., 2013).

Moreover, the vice president of the institute of the social damage of police in Tehran believes that street-working children mostly lives in urban areas and they are under the control of specific gang that brings them to street for work and collects them at night. The gangs prepare accommodation and food for these children and they want these children to work for them instead of their services (IRNA, 2012). In a study conducted in 2005 by Dr. Fatemeh Ghasemzade⁶ in cooperation with research deputy of the University of Rehabilitation Sciences and Social Welfare, 585 street working children have been studied. She found that 55 percent of these children are tended to commit delinquency (Zali, 2012).

The relationship of being a street children and delinquent was also confirmed by the child activist, Dr Raheb⁷. She divided the street working children into six groups of which the fifth group is allocated to those children who have joined the gangs and criminal networks (Rahmani, 2012).

After denoting the risk of criminal involvement, a relationship between street working children and crime owing to the working and living environment and the negative influence of street gangs, it is not far from reality that street working children can be the victims of their environment and attracted by gangs.

Measurements of Rehabilitation Center and the Risk Factor

After proving that there is a link between street working children and crime and illustrating how children are being used for criminal activities of gangs or any other groups, this part aims to discuss how this relationship leads to joining of or even organizing gangs by street working children if they do not receive social cares.

There is a Correction and Rehabilitation Centre in Tehran for the children who was arrested under the age of 18 and according to the (unofficial) statistics provided by this Centre at 2012, 60 percent of the arrested children are from street working and living children between the ages of 15 to 18. It seems that more than half of the children who work in the street are brought to this Centre at least for one time during their life. Among this 60 percent, 30 % of these children are the sole source of income of their family. There have been so much diversity in types of the crimes committed by these children, but "Robbery" was the most common once.

Moreover, there is serious concern about those 30 % of street working children who are the only source of income for their family and usually they are from female-head families (Alipur, 2011). Actually, these children are at the highest risk of criminal activities since they have to find a way on how to earn money (Sadat Hosseini, Tabarsi, Cheraghi, & Pashaeypoor, 2017), otherwise the whole family cannot survive!

Finally, In the case of forced begging which is also mentioned in a global alliance of ILO (International Labour Organization) against forced labour, the issue of "forced" to join the gangs had been highlighted (ILO, 2005). Street working children may or even may not be aware about the nature of the work that they are doing is counted as a criminal activity. Hence, at first view, they are victims of gangs but at the end, they will be known as a delinquent in society perspective! However, in both contexts they are victims of their environment and they should not be treated like offenders.

⁶ Member of Iranian Psychological Society, member of Association of Children's Rights, former professor of University of Rehabilitation Sciences and Social Welfare.

⁷ Social worker, professor, and member of directory board of University of Rehabilitation Sciences and Social Welfare.

The Consequence of the Lack of Law Enforcement

Unfortunately, increasing the number of street working children and their problems in conjunction with 60% increment of delinquent juveniles from street working children that happened in Iran recently proves that the government policies and regulation on organizing these children could not be successfully implied. It led to failure of government policy in experts' point of view (Esmailpour, 2012).

(1) Legal vacuum: Generally, there is no definition of street working children neither in Iranian principal laws and nor in labor law and law on protection of children and juvenile in particular (Soleimani, 2011). Furthermore, it is not from prediction that the specific rules for street working children have not been ratified yet. Consequently, this essential task passed on the burden of other officials such as governmental organizations, executive bodies that each of them defined differently this phenomenon. Diversity in definitions, contradictions in different point of views, and having no attention to the NGO's expertise in this field left the problem unsolved.

Article 79 of labour law of Iran prohibits employing of children under the age of 15 (Davani, 2018), however, the workplace which has less than 10 workers is exempt from the law⁸. This showed how weak is labour law inclusiveness. While, there might be more than 1,000 children working in these places and this provides the realm for employers to misuse children under the age of 15 as they are not subject of labour law that prohibits the employment of children under 15. In such a circumstance, they work for long hours in inadequate conditions and in return, they receive a feeble wage (Kazemi, 2017).

Moreover, according to Article 32 of the *International Covenant on the Rights of the Child*, which Iran is also a signatory to, it is important to protect the child's right to protection against economic exploitation and any work that may be harmful, affect the child education, or damage his health or physical, mental, and moral development (CRC, 2005).

(2) The weakness of cooperation: One of the main factors for ineffectiveness of government policy about organizing street children is the lack of cooperation between responsible organizations and lack of teamwork. Each organizations think of their own interests, for example vacating "khaneyesabz" & "khaneyereyhane", two centers for accommodating street children, due to the non-assistance of state welfare organization (SWO) and municipal (two main actors in organizing street working children) with each other (Abdi et al., 2016). In fact, the authorities decided to close these centers, instead of finding a solution for dispute resolution. It is worth mentioning that the role of government as a mediator is crucial in these situations in order to intervene, encourage responsible organizations to cooperate and monitor the consequence. The responsibility of government is not limited to an approval of regulation on organizing of street children and determination of roles and duties for each organization. Further consideration and suitable measurements need to be supplement to government policies.

(3) Failure to perform the duties properly by responsible organizations: The irresponsibility or bad performance about implementing assigned responsibilities is not just about a specific organization, it includes all responsible organizations as a common problem. We can see from the news about the violent and unpredictable arresting of street working children by "police" while they are working in the street (IRNA, 2012). This type of arresting not only conveys the feeling of being an offender to these children, but also

⁸ Article 191 of labour law says that workplaces with less than 10 employments exempted from this law and the recognition of these places depend on the government regulation.

creates fear among them that is detrimental to their cognitive development. The vice president of the Institute of Social pathology of the police (Mr. Ghomashchi) believes that recently the arbitrary arresting approach of police is renovated to social attitude and one of the aims of this institute is applying the preventive of crime policy (IRNA, 2012). The evidence showed that the police force acknowledged that their policy was not correctly preformed and this can be regarded as a successful step in revising their policy.

Moreover, studies showed that NGOs and child activists criticized the policy and programs of SWO, mainly for of the lack of supportive actions after the treatment period of street working children (Mohammadi, 2012). For instance, once they were situated and received the mental and physical treatment for a particular period by this center, they had been backed to their former condition in street. No further care, observant, and checking will been done.

Subsequently, the judiciary system (another responsible organization in this field) does not have a specific court for juvenile and they have only allocated a specific branch of their general court for juveniles' crime. This can lead to issuing inapt verdict by the non-expert judge rather than appropriate decision in the specialized field of juvenile's delinquency.

In case of NGOs, though, they do not have sufficient executive power owing to their financial situation and budget deficit. It should take into consideration that even among NGOs, there is no unification and each of them plays their own antiphons about the phenomena of street working children in Iran.

The Policy Framework

According to the defects and flaws of the existing policies that have been discussed above, creating a preventive policy for minimizing problems and danger of criminal activities is the main objective of this paper.

Generally, the policy framework is divided into two parts: (1) strengthening the existing policies on organizing street children (in general); and (2) creating preventive policy for street working children (in particular).

Strengthening of Existing Policy

The strengthening of current policies on the regulation of organizing street children can be executed through the two following stages: (1) first stage: changing the attitude or perspective about organizing policies; and (2) second stage: reforming the current policies.

First stage: The precondition of reforming the current policies is changing the attitude or perspective about them. This means that the reformation of policies is impossible without changing the government's attitude towards the policies of organizing street children. This change can be done through using the experiences and opinions of NGOs and applying them.

On one side, the NGOs have high motivation and sense of responsibility toward organizing of street children, but they do not have sufficient authority to implement their demands. On the other side, the government who has the budget does not have enough tendency to change its policy toward giving budget or cooperating with NGOs. Learning from past lessons, the defects of current policies can have significant effects on reviewing and changing the governments' attitude (Ramezankhaani, 2016).

Second stage: Reforming the policies in an effective way can strengthen the structure of current policies. This requires cooperation amongst responsible organizations and providing teamwork-based environment by government.

We have tried to classify the different steps towards this stage:

First step—identification: The first step towards identification of street working children is finding the clear official statistics about their numbers that needs active involvement of government. Afterwards, the identification process can begin by the work of social workers of each responsible organization in a teamwork-based environment, because each of these organizations has the capacity to identify these children in their centers.

Second step—attraction: The primary term in this step is “trust building”. As it has been mentioned before, the fear of street working children should be resolved via communication and social workers’ cooperation and a trust should be built again. The police force should be prohibited from any violent arresting in this step. The role of IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) is very crucial in advertising for receiving free advice and social support in favor of street working children in media (Habib Zadeh, 2015).

Third step—acceptance: After building the trust, the circumstances are ready for accepting street children into the related centers. The associated centers should not be vacated easily once dispute happened and a group of dispute settlement should be determined.

Fourth step—accommodating and categorizing: This step follows the successful acceptance of children by the centers and relates to accommodating and categorizing these children regarding their characters, features, and circumstances. Social experts and psychologists should carry out this categorization because they are supposed to build a ground for the next step, which is education (Ghorbani, 2014).

Fifth step—empowerment: This step can be done through education, training, and teaching professional skills to street working children. For instance, they should be trained how to earn money and how to produce a kind of products that can be sold in the market. By providing these kind of professional skills, not only the children find the way of earning money within a correct discipline and will not have to deal with the same problems their parents had (unemployment due to lack of professional skills), but also they will be motivated. So this step has a significant role in planning the appropriate future for these children. The role of the ministry of education in providing the educational training, the ministry of labor in job training, and the charity organizations on the selling their products, can accelerate the children’s development process. This measurement can also be very effective in decreasing the number of street working children and actuating the work of these children under direct supervisions of responsible organizations.

Sixth step—discharge: This step should be implemented very cautiously, because not all of the street children in the centers are subject of discharge. SWO announced the requests of their parents for the return of their children as a main reason for early discharge of street children, and SWO was not able to inhibit the return of their children. Hence, one of the main reports that need to be considered in this step is increasing the authority of SWO to the extent that once the experts of these centers recognize that the child must stay in the center for more time, the SWO be able to refuse the return requests of the parents.

Seventh step—support after discharge: After assuring that the street children have the prerequisites for being discharged from care centers, there should be some appropriate supporting measurements to reinforce the observance and connections with the child and his/her family more than before.

Creating Preventive Crime Policy

Paying no attention to the importance of preventive crime polices, in specific for the street working children, is one of the missing parts in the current government policies. Reviewing the relationship between

street working children and crime and evaluation of the dangers in joining criminal activities for these children proves that preventive crime policies need to be added to the current governmental policies.

One of the other purposes of this preventive crime policy, is normalizing the living and working condition of street working children, as David Brandt said: “preventive programs ultimately attempt to ‘normalize’ the child’s environment [...]” (Brandt, 2006, p. 128).

One of the other factors that should be minimized in preventive crime policy is related to education that can be done through cooperation of ministry of education as a responsible organization. Although, this is not to be limited to one organization and it needs the cooperation of the ministry of labor in providing job training and ministry of health in providing health education as well (Shahraki, 2015).

Using the remedial approach or educating the street children can be an effective way in protecting them since they will be aware of where they live. Training can encompass diverse activities such as learning about destructive effects of addictive drugs, enhancing their knowledge and life skills.

Consulting with the organization called “psychology and counseling organization of Iran” can be very helpful in providing guidance to the families and their children who are at risk. In addition, the job search department of ministry of labor can give the priority to the parents of street working children who are at risk.

Conclusions

As mentioned owing to the legal vacuum, there is no official definition by the legal authorities on the working of a child, however, per the definition given by the Central Bank of Iran: “in order for an action to be counted as job, it must be legitimate” (Central Bank of Iran, 2012). Therefore, the activities of working children in streets are illegal and as they are inconsistent with the given definition, they are not considered a job. Consequently, these working children are not to be viewed as a worker and further be deprived of the benefits entitled by the labor code. In fact, based on the information given up until here, what the street working child does is indeed an instance of exploitation, whether criminal groups are ensnaring them or he is obligated to work in order to survive.

On the other hand, for the following reasons, street working children cannot be regarded as criminals:

(1) Lack of rational choices and actions double-causes children being forced to work out in the street (Mobaraki, 2012). As a result, due to lack of proper awareness in doing what they do, they cannot and should not be called criminals since one of the main prerequisites in indicting a person, as an offender is being aware of the offense and having free will in committing it.

(2) Due to immaturity and compelling environmental factors as well as lack of family support, she or he is to be considered more a “victim” than a “criminal”.

(3) Having a system in which street working children are supported neither by law nor by social services and not even having access to education and employment, is leaving them alone to become delinquent.

As a conclusion, it found the major reason behind the deficient implementation and execution of the government’s policies stems from lack of proper coordination amongst the related organizations.

(1) Inconsistencies between statistical figures in different areas presented by responsible organizations;

(2) Lack of unification even in defining a sole description for street working children;

(3) Lack of drawing up a report entailing the activities regarding organizing these children and a public report, showing the government’s indifferent attitude;

(4) Incompetency of the government in coordinating the different responsible organizations.

In the end, it was ascertained that strengthening the government's policies in terms of proper implementation of an organizing scheme, whereby the current policies are reformed in conjunction with putting focused attention on preventive measures of crime while taking into account the risk factor, can help to reduce the crimes and delinquency of street working children, considerably.

Another look at the phenomenon of street working children is the main indicator that can be used for measuring the safety performance of the family and society. In this respect, the increase on street working children's number is the consequences of poor performance of responsible organizations. Otherwise, no child is born with criminal or delinquent behavior.

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