

The Street Kids of Calabar: A Punitive Approach is Not Enough

Briefing: February 2017

In recent times Calabar, the Cross River state capital has been faced with rising insecurity as a result of violence and criminality attributed to street children locally called 'Skolombo Boys' and 'Lacasera Girls.' These homeless children beg for alms and scavenge for recyclable materials on the street, and have become a problem to residents of the state. From roaming the street for survival in bands, some have formed into criminal gangs. They have been associated with incidents of robbery, kidnapping, rape, pick-pocketing, and drug abuse.

The problem of 'Skolombo Boys' began around 2013 and seems to have gathered steam in recent times, following a rise in violence and criminality associated with gangs of children in the state. In 2015, the state government inaugurated a special security task force code-named 'Operation Skolombo' to address the menace of street children in the state capital. This initiative however, has not been able to effectively address the problem as violence and criminality associated with street children is still prevalent, particularly in Calabar.

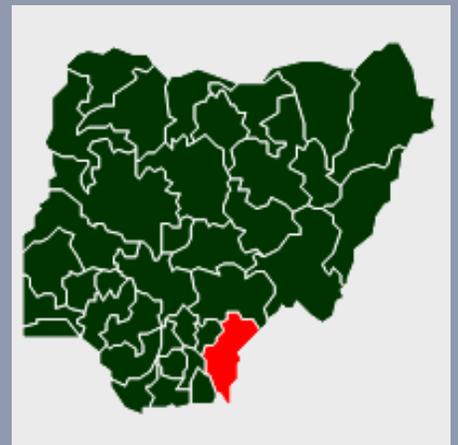
Punitive measure alone will not solve this problem. For the issue to be addressed effectively, stakeholders need to emphasize prevention and rehabilitation as well.

The Calabar Street Children: Evolution and Transformation

The phenomenon of street children is common to most cities in Nigeria. However, criminality associated with street children is a serious problem in Calabar, and is becoming a security issue that needs to be addressed. Street children often live in abandoned public buildings, motor parks, markets and other public spaces in various parts of the city, particularly around Flour Mill, Cultural Centre, Bogobiri, Murtala Mohammed highway, Etim Edem Park, and others. They survive by eating remnants of food at the venue of cultural events, begging for alms, scavenging for recyclable materials, running errands for people, and doing menial work such as loading passenger buses at motor parks.

As they grow older and adapt to the street life, they are increasingly at risk of predation by criminals, who rob and at times force them into illicit activities. Further, as a result of the psychological trauma of societal rejection and abuse, and the lack of parental love and care, they become even more vulnerable to negative influences on the street. Rather than providing support and rehabilitation, they are neglected by society, stigmatized, and even branded as witches and wizards. These children therefore become hardened and adopt a life of crime.

Cross River State, Nigeria



This briefing outlines the evolution and transformation of street children in Cross River state. It identifies the key drivers and traces the causal link between the prevalence of street children and rise in criminality and gang violence, and summarizes the emerging security implications, and provides recommendations for managing the menace and promoting security in the state.

Scope and Limitations: We recognize that the data collected in this project is not an exhaustive tally of all incidents of violence. However, to the extent that data are representative of the patterns and trends, findings are indicated in the report.

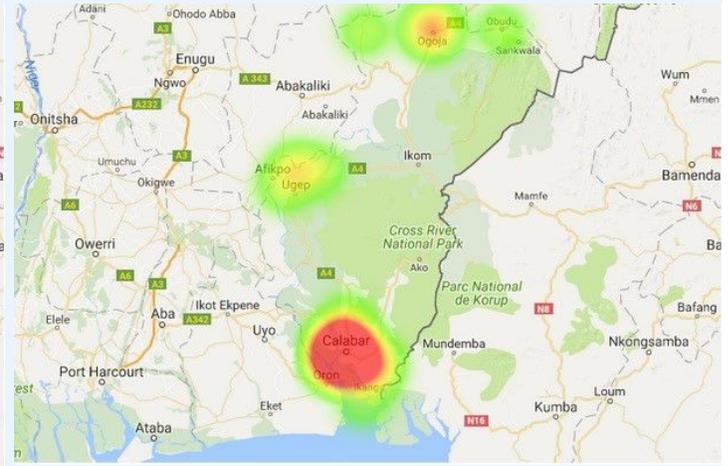
Figure 1: Geographical Concentration of Criminality in Cross River

Gang Violence and Criminality (2009-2012)

Gang Violence and Criminality (2013-2016)



From 2009-2012 violent criminality was mainly concentrated around the city of Calabar.



From 2013-2016, there were almost three times as many incidents of gang violence and criminality reported across a wider geographic spread in the state

Key Causal Factors and Drivers

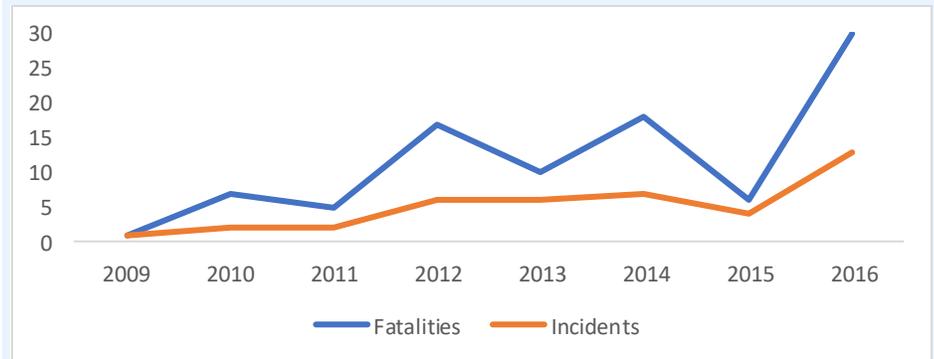
The phenomenon of street children is connected to factors as beliefs in child witches, dysfunctional homes, child trafficking, urbanization, and forced migration.

Misfortunes in families may be superstitiously blamed on children, especially those with disabilities or other unusual characteristics. In such cases they can be taken to churches and traditional healing homes where they are often branded as witches and wizards, then mistreated and abandoned on the street.

A number of the children are products of broken families and dysfunctional homes where their parents or guardians either cannot or will not care for them. Others are either orphaned or run away from home to escape violence and abuse.

Some of them were trafficked from rural communities to cities by relatives and child trafficking syndicates for child labour and commercial sex. Traffickers often coerce

Figure 2: Gang Violence and Criminality in Cross River 2009-2016



Trend shows increased fatalities associated with gang violence and criminality in 2016. Data sources: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org and www.aclldata.com, CIEPD, P4P, etc. integrated on P4P Peace Map.

children away from parents in rural communities with the promise of paid services or apprenticeship in the cities.

Further, the increase in the number of street children and their involvement in criminality is also connected to urbanization, as well as internal displacement resulting from recent communal conflicts, particularly in Odukpani, Abi, and Yakurr LGAs.

The annual Calabar carnival has also been identified as a factor. The demand for child labour including teenage sex workers is reportedly in high demand by pimps, drug dealers and brothel owners during the annual festival. Such children may eventually end up on the street where they fend for themselves and gain a sense of belonging by bonding with other children. Some of them have been reportedly involved in gambling, drug abuse, robbery, kidnapping, and sexual violence.

The 'Skolombo' Boys and 'Lacaseras' Girls

A key criminal manifestation of the challenge of street children in the state is the emergence of gangs known as 'Skolombo Boys'. These are children who took to a life of crime and violence after years living on the streets. The oldest among them are teenagers, and they move in large numbers with guns, knives, machetes, and other crude weapons with which they attack and rob residents. They have also been linked with incidents of kidnapping, rape, cult clashes, and political violence during the 2015 general elections in the state.

The 'Skolombo' phenomenon reportedly started in 2013 when some of the street children formed into gangs of criminals and cultists. It is largely one of the fallouts from rival cult wars which were frequently fought on the streets. As clashes among rival campus-based cults spilled into the streets, cult groups started establishing street wings and enlisting street children as foot soldiers in their supremacy battles for relevance and territorial expansion. These set of street children became known as the 'Skolombo Boys,' which is reportedly a derivative of the phrase 'Obtain by Force' in local slang.

As cult gangs increasingly relied on these children, the street life has become a gateway to membership of such fraternities as Maphites, Vikings, and Black Axe as each group established their own street wings as junior members - Junior Vikings, Junior Black Axe, Blackskins, Skyloo, and others. The

situation however reportedly degenerated during the build-up to the 2015 general elections, as cult groups recruited more street children to intimidate or attack opponents of their political patrons. In the aftermath of the elections, the 'Skolombo boys' became deeply involved in other criminal activities including robbery, kidnapping, drug abuse, and sexual violence.

The most sexually active among the female street kids are locally referred to as 'Lacaseras Girls'; named after a popular soft drink. They are reportedly so-called because it is generally believed that all it will cost a man to have his way with these girls is to offer them a bottle or money to buy one. The girls are engaged in prostitution and drug abuse. The demand for street girls is reportedly high among pimps, brothel owners, child traffickers and drug dealers in the state.

Some of the girls are reported to have been raped by male street kids and older men who attack them on the street at night. They are at a high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS and getting pregnant. Often, babies from such pregnancies are abandoned or sold to child traffickers. Some of the 'Lacaseras girls' are reportedly involved in child trafficking as they are contracted by operators of 'Baby Factories' to get pregnant and produce babies for sale to clients.

Implications

The issue of street children has implications for the socio-economic development and security in the state. It is a social problem that has progressively become a security challenge.

First, the stigmatization and negative perception of the children by society, as well as the harassment they face in their daily life inclines them towards anti-social behaviour including involvement in criminality and violence. They are reportedly subjected to physical abuse by law enforcement agents and criminal gangs. They are frequently detained by the police who arrest them on such offences as homelessness, loitering, or petty theft.

Many of these children have been drawn into criminality by circumstances beyond their control. They may be orphaned or otherwise unattended to by parents and guardians. They may be working in menial jobs under dangerous conditions, which adversely affects their health and social development.

As children without formal education or socialization at the family level, they are likely to face an unstable future, and end up as outcasts. Those who are able to survive through childhood into adulthood become traumatized and criminalized. Then they, in turn, oppress and victimize other children, creating a vicious cycle of child abuse, violence and criminality.

The Way Forward

In the last few years, the issue of street children has been a major target of government agencies. While government has adopted mainly punitive measures, some CSOs have provided welfare assistance to the children, but their programmes have not been able to take the children off the street. The problem seems to be escalating as more children find their way into the street perpetrating violence and criminality. In the face of the failure of past and current initiatives to effectively address the problem, there is the need for a shift from a punitive emphasis on eradication to a focus on providing support to the children.

Government emphasis on eradication typified by the establishment of a special security task force - 'Operation Skolombo' may not be an effective way of addressing the problem over the long term. Such punitive measures exacerbate distrust between the children and government agencies, especially given frequent detention by the police for such charges as homelessness, loitering or petty theft.

Inasmuch as the criminal dimension of street children in the state is a manifestation of interrelated drivers, stakeholders must adopt a systemic approach that holistically addresses the underlying structures and systems that promote violence and criminality associated with children. Since the menace cannot be effectively addressed in isolation, there is need for a multi-layered approach. Therefore, the problem needs to be addressed holistically as follows.

First, the state government should collaborate with relevant stakeholders to address the issue holistically. There are many civil society organisations working to address the challenge of street children in the state. Government needs to catalyse these organi-

sations to work together to address the problem collectively. Government needs to drive the process by commissioning an in-depth study and situation analysis of street children in the state and develop a comprehensive strategy to address the problem in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Second, civil society organisations should intensify their efforts to provide welfare support services for the children including counselling for the children and their families. CSOs should also collaborate and share information with other stakeholders on best practices and lessons learned from their experience.

Third, more measures need to be taken to ensure social and behavioural change regarding child labour.

Fourth, there should be a focus on the reorientation of families through media campaign at the local government and community levels on the consequence of the violation of child rights. Churches and the traditional healing homes should be sensitized on the dangers of stigmatizing children, and the need for child rights protection. Churches wield significant religious and cultural influence that can effect a change.

Fifth, the child right law should be fully implemented to give every child in the state the right to adequate parental care, maintenance and protection. In line with the Child Rights Act, government should put in place measures to punish anyone that violates the rights of the child.

Finally, government should collaborate with relevant stakeholders to establish a rehabilitation centre and a correctional facility that includes counselling, social welfare, recreational and psychological support services. This will ensure that rehabilitated children are properly reintegrated into society.

Timeline

- 1990s**
 - ⇒ Hundreds of children already living in abandoned public buildings, motor parks, and other public spaces in Calabar South LGA.
- 2003**
 - ⇒ The challenge of street children identified by CSOs who made efforts to address the issue
- 2008**
 - ⇒ Street children gradually becoming a challenge and locally referred to as Isakaba
- 2009**
 - ⇒ Wife of the former governor of the state, Mrs. Imoke, established the Destiny Child Centre to cater for the homeless children in the state.
- 2013**
 - ⇒ Emergence of the first children cult in the state, the 'Skolombo boys'.
- 2014**
 - ⇒ Cult groups recruit street children as foot soldiers to work for their political patrons in the build-up to the 2015 general elections.
- 2015**
 - ⇒ The state government established a special security task force code-named 'Operation Skolombo'
- 2016**
 - ⇒ Rise in violence and criminality associated with street children.