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**Street children in multicultural societies: The case of Greece**

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**1. Introduction**

Although the concept of street children is, often, exclusively associated with developing countries (America, Asia & Africa), nevertheless the social phenomenon does exist in Europe. The extent of the phenomenon is different from non- Western examples. However in order to emphasize the universality of the phenomenon the term street children as established in European and non European countries.

**2. Basic assumptions**

The discussions concerning street children are indicative of the broader social discussions about "child protection", which are in turn part of the broader debate about the position of children in society. Victims rolls show that children are first and foremost the victims of common crimes such as theft, vandalism and violence. Although street children phenomenon is related to broader social problems such as poverty deprivation and family.

Possible perspectives considering the phenomenon of street children as a problem.

Three main approaches, mostly interrelated, are offered:

- a) a protection oriented
- b) a repression oriented
- c) a human rights oriented

All are connected with the "problematic" behavior of children.

a) A protection oriented approach.

The child protection is the most common one since the turn of the century. Children are consider being different from adults, they are "in complete" and have to be treated separately. At the some time children are our future, so protecting them from potential social evils is imperative.

-They are obliged to attend school

-Street children have eluded judicial control and have become a new target group for child protection measures. They therefore require extra attention and efforts must be focused on the introduction of street children to the traditional socializing systems of school and the home.

b) A repression oriented approach

Approach which views street children as a potential threat to public order, approach becoming increasingly wide-spread in the criminology of juveniles.

Protecting society- through implementing law and public order is used as an argument to return to classic repressive action.

c) A human rights oriented approach

Focuses to the individual child the legal protection of human rights is viewing street children as human beings whose fundamental rights have been violated.

### **3. Definition**

Street children are understood to be children without any shelter. In Europe such street children are the exception. Therefore for European and other Western countries the concept of street children needs to be much broader.

In Greece until 1992 the phenomenon appears to affect mainly a minority group of gypsy origin. They work under the close supervision and protection of family members on the streets of Greece's large urban areas and most live with their parents or with members of the extended family. After the arrival in Greece of migrants from former social countries many children mostly from Albania started begging or working in the street. After a press campaign and public opinion pressure the police do not allow these children to work or to beg in the streets. Apparently it seems that there are no street children in the large urban centers in Greece. The problem although exists but becomes invisible.

The actual knowledge about street children depends mainly on NGO'S. It demonstrates how official structures can be oblivious to the street children phenomenon.

### **4. Street children population**

In Greece there are no official statistics of children living and working on the street under adult supervision or protection. A recent report (2004) from the Commissioner for children rights mentioned the number of 3.000. The implementation of a program hosting street children to the St. Varvara center for children in the years 1998-2002 mentioned a number of 661 (from those in the same period 502 escaped from the institution, 90 were delivered to their parents, 47 they have been transferred, 22 they returned to the police). In addition March 2003, 20 street children were hosted in different centers all over Greece. (Volos: 5 Florina:3 Crete:4 Ioannina:5 Kalamaki:3).

### **5. Models of causality and street children**

We underline:

- (1) The multifactorial nature of the phenomenon.
- (2) A cumulative effect of several causes (social, economic and cultural) seem to reinforce individual causes.
- (3) Some causal factors are more closely linked to particular manifestations of the phenomenon (political upheaval, loss of parents, poverty).

### **6. Government policy and social policy on street children**

In Greece the phenomenon is recently officially recognized creating, a special commissioner for children rights. In 2004 a special report has been published with the results of the implementation of the program (Protection and social care of street children 1998-2000). Although the great expectations no financial support was offered, the street children has been placed to several institutions with no protection and control and as we mentioned before from 661 children 502 escaped. Only NGO'S take care of street children. NGO'S to some extent fill the gap left by the official authorities.

### **7. The future of street children**

Most studies refer that the number of street children will increase. Moreover the phenomenon is likely to become more and more visible and people become more aware of the phenomenon. In our opinion the situation of street children will deteriorate in the future.

### **8. Possible measures**

It is necessary that more political attention be given to the social and legal position of all children including particularly street children.

Adoption and implementation of preventive action (and not repression oriented) should be taken with the necessary resources.

Policy guidelines

Protection of families who are suffering from marginalization.

Official policy has to be a policy of prevention and not of repression.

It is also necessary to alter the educational system to meet the needs of street children, in order that they are not excluded from society before they feel they are members of it.