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Exploring the pathways to street life among children in Aceh, Indonesia: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT
Street-connected children experience various interconnected social, economic, family, and environmental vulnerabilities. In Aceh, Indonesia, this phenomenon is complex, as children's involvement in street activities is influenced by family poverty, family breakdown, charitable giving practices, and limited access to education and stable employment. This study aimed to explore the experiences of children who live and work on the streets in Aceh, focusing on the social, economic, family, and environmental factors influencing their involvement in street life. An exploratory qualitative case study design using an embedded case study approach was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Participants included street-connected children, parents, caregivers, and institutional staff. Data were analyzed thematically using the framework analysis approach, supported by NVivo software. The findings revealed that children's involvement in street life resulted from the interaction of multiple factors, including economic hardship, family dysfunction, violence, parental separation, school dropout, intergenerational begging practices, and limited social protection. Some children used the streets as an escape from family conflicts, while others engaged in street activities to help meet their families' economic needs. These activities included begging, street singing, selling goods at intersections, and other informal work. Peer relationships provided emotional support and a sense of belonging; however, indications of parental pressure and coordinated begging activities suggested potential risks of child exploitation. Community charitable giving helped meet children's immediate needs but may also contribute to the continuation of their involvement in street activities. Overall, this phenomenon represents a multidimensional issue

requiring integrated child protection, family-based, social, and structural approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

Children who live or work on the streets (street-connected children) remain an important social and public health concern because their involvement in street life is associated with multiple, interconnected forms of vulnerability rather than a uniform experience. Children who spend a significant proportion of their time living or working in street environments may face violence, exploitation, hazardous environmental conditions, social exclusion, educational disruption, substance use, and barriers to accessing healthcare services (Jörgensen et al., 2024; Embleton et al., 2016). These circumstances may affect their physical health, psychological well-being, social development, and future opportunities.

Children's involvement in street life should not be understood solely as an individual choice or behavioral problem. Rather, this condition often emerges from the interaction of poverty, family conflict, violence, social exclusion, and broader structural inequalities (Hunter & Flores, 2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis involving 49 studies from 24 countries identified poverty, family conflict, and violence as among the most frequently reported factors associated with children's involvement in street life (Embleton et al., 2016).

Family circumstances play an important role in shaping children's pathways into street life. Poverty alone does not necessarily explain why a child becomes street-connected. Economic hardship may interact with family conflict, neglect, domestic violence, inadequate caregiving, and unstable family relationships (Embleton et al., 2016; Hunter & Flores, 2021). In economically disadvantaged households, children may also become involved in income-generating activities as part of their families' survival strategies. This creates a dilemma because activities perceived by families as economic contributions may simultaneously expose children to hazardous work, exploitation, educational disruption, and other developmental risks (Jörgensen et al., 2024; Woan et al., 2013).

Therefore, children's presence on the streets needs to be understood within a broader context encompassing household economic conditions, family relationships, survival strategies, and unequal access to social and economic resources. An approach that focuses exclusively on children's behavior risks overlooking the environmental factors that sustain their involvement in street life.

The Aceh context adds another dimension to this phenomenon. Community solidarity, social concern, and charitable giving are

important aspects of social life in Acehnese society. However, when children repeatedly receive financial rewards through begging or working in public spaces, such responses may indirectly contribute to the economic sustainability of street-based activities. This does not mean that charitable giving causes children to become street-connected. Rather, charitable contributions may interact with poverty and family survival strategies by providing an immediate source of income that potentially reinforces children's continued involvement in street activities.

In Aceh, children's involvement in street life should also be understood as a phenomenon influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including family dysfunction, poverty, exploitation, and limited institutional support. Accordingly, the culture of charitable giving needs to be examined within its broader social and economic context rather than being considered an isolated cause of children's presence on the streets.

The phenomenon becomes increasingly complex when children's street activities are influenced, organized, or economically controlled by adults. In such circumstances, children may be directed to specific locations, required to generate a certain amount of income, or made dependent on adults who financially benefit from their presence on the streets. These situations cannot be reduced to poverty alone, as they also involve child protection concerns, economic exploitation, and, under certain circumstances, trafficking or commercial exploitation (Jörgensen et al., 2024; Embleton et al., 2016; Coren et al., 2016). In the context of child protection in Indonesia, economic exploitation represents a serious threat, particularly when children's involvement in economic activities in public spaces becomes socially normalized (Ombudsman Republik Indonesia, 2025).

Although increasing attention has been given to the vulnerabilities of children who live or work on the streets, gaps remain in understanding how these factors interact within specific cultural and social contexts. Previous evidence indicates that poverty, family dysfunction, violence, exploitation, and barriers to accessing services are important factors associated with children's involvement in street life (Embleton et al., 2016; Hunter & Flores, 2021; Jörgensen et al., 2024). However, the meanings and interactions of these factors may vary across communities.

In Aceh, qualitative research specifically exploring how children who live or work on the streets understand and describe their pathways into street life remains limited. Understanding how family circumstances, economic conditions, peer relationships, community responses, and institutional environments interact is therefore essential. This research gap is particularly important because interventions that focus solely on removing children from public spaces may address the visible manifestations of the problem without necessarily changing the underlying family and structural conditions

that initially contribute to their involvement in street life (Goodman et al., 2020; Embleton et al., 2016).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of children who live or work on the streets in Aceh, Indonesia, focusing on the pathways through which they become involved in street life, their experiences within street environments, and the interconnected family, social, economic, and structural factors that contribute to the continuation of their involvement in street life.

METHOD

This study employed an exploratory qualitative case study design using an embedded case study approach to explore the experiences of former street-connected children and the influence of family and environmental factors on their reintegration following institutional rehabilitation in Aceh, Indonesia. A qualitative case study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within real-life contexts while capturing perspectives from different groups involved in the rehabilitation and child reintegration processes. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was adopted as the conceptual framework to understand how family, institutional, community, and broader social environments interact in shaping children's experiences and reintegration processes. The study was conducted in Aceh Province, Indonesia, involving several institutional and community settings, including orphanages (Panti Asuhan), halfway houses (Rumah Singgah), and community environments where former street-connected children returned after completing institutional rehabilitation. Data collection took place from November 2023 to January 2024.

A total of 41 participants were recruited using maximum variation purposive sampling to obtain diverse perspectives on the rehabilitation and reintegration processes. The participants consisted of 11 children with previous street-life experiences who were living in institutional care, 10 children with previous street-life experiences who were living outside institutional settings, 10 parents, and 10 institutional caregivers or staff members. Children with previous experiences of street involvement were eligible to participate if they were aged 18 years or younger, had experienced living or working on the streets, and had undergone institutional rehabilitation or reintegration. The parents included in the study were biological parents or primary caregivers of children with experiences of street involvement. Meanwhile, institutional caregivers or staff members were selected based on their direct experience in providing care, rehabilitation, or support to children who had previously lived or worked on the streets. All participants were required to be willing to participate and able to provide informed consent or assent, as appropriate to their age and circumstances. Recruitment continued

until data saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of substantially new information or concepts relevant to the research questions in subsequent data collection.

Data were collected using several qualitative methods, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. These methods were employed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and enhance data triangulation. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method and were conducted using an interview guide developed based on the study objectives and the ecological framework. The interview questions explored children's experiences of street life, family relationships, experiences during institutional rehabilitation, expectations and challenges following rehabilitation, sources of family and social support, and various factors influencing children's ability to maintain integration within their families and communities. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian or Acehnese, depending on participants' preferences, and audio-recorded after obtaining their consent. All interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim. In addition, non-participant observations were conducted to document participants' interactions and behaviors, environmental conditions, and contextual factors relevant to the research phenomenon. Institutional documents, rehabilitation records, and child protection-related documents were also reviewed to provide contextual information and support the interpretation of findings from interviews and observations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework approach described by Braun and Clarke. NVivo software was used to support data organization, coding, data retrieval, and systematic comparisons across categories. The analytical process began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of 41 participants were involved in this study, comprising children with previous experiences of street life, parents or guardians, and institutional caregivers or staff members. The participants represented different backgrounds and living arrangements, providing diverse perspectives on the rehabilitation and reintegration experiences of former street-connected children.

Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 41)

Characteristics Categories	Description	n	%
Participant role	Children with street-life experiences living in institutions	11	26,8
	Children with street-life experiences living outside institutions/with families or in the	10	24,4

	community		
	Parents/guardians	10	24,4
	Institutional caregivers/staff	10	24,4
Gender	Male	30	73,2
	Female	11	26,8
Childrens' Age	8–16 Years Old	21	51,2
	Midpoint of age range*	12,0	–
Parents' Age	22–50 Years Old	10	24,4
	Midpoint of age range*	36,0	–
Care givers' Age	25–50 Years Old	10	24,4
	Midpoint of age range*	37,5	–
Children's residential status	Living in institutions	11	26,8
	Living outside institutions/with families or in the community	10	24,4
Street-life experience	Previous experience of living on the streets	21	51,2
Total	All participants	41	100,0

**The midpoint represents the arithmetic midpoint of the reported age range, not the actual mean or median age of participants.*

The data analysis identified two major themes concerning the sustainability of children's reintegration following institutional rehabilitation: (1) Family Dynamics and Socioeconomic Challenges as Barriers to Sustainable Reintegration and (2) Discontinuity of Post-Rehabilitation Support and the Risk of Returning to Street Life. These themes illustrate that successful reintegration involves more than the physical return of children to their families or communities. Rather, it depends on the interaction of family relationships, socioeconomic circumstances, and the continuity of support provided after institutional rehabilitation.

Theme 1. Family Dynamics and Socioeconomic Challenges as Barriers to Sustainable Reintegration

The findings indicate that family dynamics and socioeconomic conditions play a significant role in determining whether positive changes achieved during institutional rehabilitation can be sustained after children return to their families and communities. Although rehabilitation may improve children's discipline, motivation, and educational aspirations, these changes can be difficult to maintain when children return to environments characterized by limited emotional support, inadequate parental supervision, persistent poverty, and the continuation of street-based economic activities.

One important finding concerns limited family acceptance and emotional support. Some participants described difficulties receiving emotional encouragement and support after returning home. This suggests that physical reunification with family members does not necessarily indicate successful reintegration. Children also need emotional acceptance, trust, effective communication, and

recognition of their developmental needs. These aspects are particularly important because the transition from institutional care to family life may expose children to familiar challenges that initially contributed to their involvement in street life.

This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting family relationships and emotional attachment as important protective factors for vulnerable children. Supportive family environments can strengthen resilience, psychological well-being, and positive social adjustment (Schrader-McMillan & Herrera, 2016; Greeson et al., 2024). Therefore, emotional support within the family should be considered an essential component of the reintegration process, rather than an additional form of assistance.

Another important aspect identified in this study was limited parental caregiving capacity and supervision. Participants described inadequate parental monitoring and limited parental involvement in children's daily activities after returning home. Such circumstances may increase children's exposure to previous peer groups and street environments, potentially making it difficult for them to maintain the behavioral changes developed during rehabilitation.

These findings demonstrate that institutional rehabilitation cannot function independently of the family environment. Positive behavioral changes developed within structured institutional settings may gradually weaken when children return to families that cannot provide adequate supervision and support. Previous research on children transitioning from residential care has similarly emphasized the importance of continuous support during the transition period to maintain positive developmental outcomes (Kvamme et al., 2022). Parental involvement and monitoring are also particularly important during adolescence, when children's social relationships and behavioral patterns continue to develop (Lionetti et al., 2019).

The findings further revealed the intergenerational normalization of begging and street-based livelihoods. Participants described street activities as familiar practices within their family environments, with some children having been introduced to begging from an early age. This finding suggests that children's involvement in street life cannot be understood simply as an individual response to poverty. Instead, it may become embedded in family survival strategies and social practices within the environments in which children grow up.

From an ecological perspective, children's development is shaped by interactions within their immediate family and social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). When street-based income-generating activities become normalized within families, children may find it difficult to adopt alternative livelihood patterns even after completing rehabilitation. Consequently, interventions that focus exclusively on changing children's behavior

without addressing established family practices may produce limited long-term outcomes.

Persistent household economic hardship further complicates the reintegration process. Participants described situations in which families prioritized immediate household needs, including food and daily expenses, over children's education and long-term development. As a result, some children experienced pressure to contribute financially to their households. These circumstances indicate that poverty is not only associated with children's initial involvement in street life but may also become a major barrier to maintaining the outcomes of rehabilitation.

Economic hardship can restrict families' ability to support children's education and development while increasing the likelihood that children will become involved again in income-generating activities. Therefore, strengthening family capacity and providing socioeconomic assistance should be considered important components of sustainable reintegration programs (Goodman et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2024).

The findings also demonstrate the close relationship between poverty and family dynamics. Families experiencing prolonged economic difficulties may prioritize immediate survival needs, limiting their capacity to provide consistent emotional support and parental supervision. This suggests that interventions focusing solely on behavioral changes among children may have limited long-term effectiveness. Sustainable reintegration requires approaches that strengthen children's individual capacities while simultaneously addressing the socioeconomic circumstances of their families (Janssen et al., 2025).

These findings can be further understood through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, particularly the concept of the microsystem. The microsystem refers to the immediate environments in which children interact directly, including their families and close social relationships. Children's development is influenced by the quality and nature of these everyday interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). When the family environment remains characterized by poverty, limited caregiving capacity, and the normalization of street-based activities, positive changes achieved during institutional rehabilitation may be difficult to sustain. Thus, successful reintegration depends not only on changes within children themselves but also on improvements in the immediate environments to which they return.

Theme 2. Discontinuity of Post-Rehabilitation Support and the Risk of Returning to Street Life

The second major theme concerns the discontinuity of support following children's completion of institutional rehabilitation.

Participants described how rehabilitation institutions provided structured routines, supervision, guidance, and opportunities to develop positive behaviors. However, these forms of support often decreased after children returned to their families and communities. This finding highlights that reintegration should not be regarded as a single event occurring when children leave an institution but rather as a continuous process requiring sustained support after reunification.

The transition from institutional care to family life emerged as a critical period in the reintegration process. Children may experience difficulties adjusting to family environments with different structures, expectations, and levels of support compared with institutional settings. Although institutional rehabilitation may provide temporary stability and protection, the family environment may not always offer similar conditions.

Previous evidence indicates that successful reintegration requires adequate preparation before reunification and continued assistance after children return to their families (UNICEF, 2020; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2017). Without structured follow-up mechanisms, the underlying problems that initially contributed to children's involvement in street life may remain unresolved. Therefore, rehabilitation programs should include preparation for both children and their families before discharge, followed by systematic monitoring after their return to the community.

Closely related to this issue is limited follow-up and discontinuity of support. The findings suggest that inadequate follow-up and weak coordination between rehabilitation institutions and families may increase the risk of unsuccessful reintegration. Families may continue to require assistance in addressing parenting difficulties, economic challenges, and children's psychosocial needs even after the formal rehabilitation process has ended.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of family preparation, caregiver involvement, and continuous professional support in promoting the reintegration of vulnerable children (Coren et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2024). Follow-up interventions, including home visits, family counseling, parenting programs, and community-based monitoring, may help identify emerging difficulties before children become involved in street activities again. Such interventions are particularly important because the end of institutional care does not necessarily indicate that children and their families are ready to manage the challenges of reintegration independently.

Another concern identified in this study was the risk of returning to previous street environments. Participants indicated that children remained vulnerable to reconnecting with previous street environments and peer networks after returning home. This

vulnerability may increase when family supervision is limited and alternative educational and social opportunities are unavailable.

Peer relationships and social environments are important influences on children's continued involvement in street-based activities (Greeson et al., 2024; Schrader-McMillan & Herrera, 2016). Consequently, maintaining rehabilitation outcomes requires more than individual behavioral changes. Children also need access to supportive social environments, positive peer relationships, and meaningful opportunities for education and community participation. Without these alternatives, returning to familiar street environments may become an accessible option, particularly for children whose family circumstances remain unchanged.

These findings support the need for family- and community-based rehabilitation approaches. Institutional rehabilitation alone may not be sufficient to guarantee sustainable reintegration. Residential programs can provide temporary safety, education, and psychosocial support, but long-term outcomes are strongly influenced by the environments to which children return. A comprehensive approach should therefore integrate institutional rehabilitation with family strengthening and community-based support (Goodman et al., 2020).

Within this approach, community health nurses may play an important role in strengthening continuity of care after rehabilitation. Through family assessments, home visits, health education, parenting support, psychosocial counseling, and collaboration with social welfare institutions, community nurses can help identify the challenges experienced by children and their families at an early stage. Family-centered approaches may also strengthen caregivers' capacity to support children's health and development while reducing their vulnerability to renewed involvement in street life (Tetlow et al., 2024).

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, sustainable reintegration requires effective interaction between different environmental systems. Families, rehabilitation institutions, schools, communities, and social welfare services need to work collaboratively to support children's development. The relationships and interactions between these settings constitute an important dimension of the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013).

When communication and coordination between families and rehabilitation institutions are weak, continuity of support may be disrupted. Conversely, stronger collaboration between these systems can help maintain the positive changes achieved during rehabilitation. This emphasizes that responsibility for reintegration should not rest solely with children or their families but should be shared by the institutions and community networks involved in child protection and development.

Finally, the findings highlight the need to move beyond rehabilitation models that primarily focus on individual children toward approaches that are family-centered and community-based. Rehabilitation programs should not end when children leave institutional care. Continuous family strengthening, parenting support, economic empowerment, educational assistance, and professional follow-up are necessary to address the interconnected conditions that contribute to children's vulnerability. By strengthening the environments surrounding children, rehabilitation programs may achieve more sustainable outcomes and reduce the likelihood of their returning to street life.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the sustainable reintegration of former street-connected children following institutional rehabilitation is strongly influenced by family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and the continuity of post-rehabilitation support. Limited family acceptance, inadequate parental supervision, persistent poverty, and the normalization of street-based economic activities may undermine the positive changes achieved during rehabilitation. Furthermore, insufficient follow-up and weak coordination between rehabilitation institutions, families, and communities may increase children's vulnerability to returning to street life. These findings highlight that institutional rehabilitation alone is insufficient to ensure long-term reintegration. A more comprehensive, family-centered, and community-based approach is needed, involving continuous family support, parenting assistance, socioeconomic empowerment, educational opportunities, and coordinated professional follow-up. Strengthening the interconnected environments surrounding children is essential to maintaining rehabilitation outcomes and promoting their long-term well-being and social inclusion.

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