



STREET CHILDREN IN ACEH: CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND INSTITUTIONAL DETERMINANTS OF VULNERABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Street children remain a critical social issue in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh Province, where cultural, economic, and institutional factors shape their vulnerability. This study explores the lived experiences of street children in Aceh and identifies the underlying factors that perpetuate their street involvement. A qualitative embedded case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. A total of 41 participants were involved, consisting of street children, caregivers, and family members. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in shelters, community centers, and street locations to capture diverse lived experiences and perspectives. Non-participant observations were carried out to explore daily routines, interactions, and coping strategies in natural settings. Additionally, relevant institutional and community documents were analyzed to provide contextual understanding and triangulate the data. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. Data were analysed thematically and triangulated across sources. Five interrelated factors emerged: family dysfunction, the culture of giving, poverty, criminal exploitation, and weak institutional support. Street children often transition from unsafe family environments to street life, which provides temporary survival but exposes them to exploitation and trauma. Placement in childcare institution orphanages offers safety but presents challenges of adjustment, lack of family support, and insufficient psychosocial services. Reintegration into society remains fragile due to the absence of structured follow-up support. The phenomenon of street children in Aceh is sustained by cultural, economic, and systemic factors. A holistic intervention is required, integrating family strengthening, culturally sensitive community engagement, and trauma-informed institutional care.

Keywords: case study; qualitative; street children; support

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of street children is an alarming global concern, with an estimated 10–15 million children worldwide living on the streets (WHO, 2020). They face abuse, neglect, exploitation, violence, and poor health outcomes (Darma et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Poverty, family conflict, natural disasters, and socioeconomic hardship are major causes of this phenomenon (Embleton et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2016). In Asia and Africa, limited education, financial hardship, and family coercion further contribute to the problem (Ginting & Shofwan, 2021). In Indonesia, there are about 4.1 million street children, with Jakarta and West Java recording the highest numbers (MoSA, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation, increasing cases from 8,320 in October to 67,368 by December 2020 (DTKS, 2020). Street children experience multiple vulnerabilities, including violence, exploitation, malnutrition, and psychological distress (Obimakinde, 2023; Vameghi et al., 2023; Christmas, Anisyaputri, & Mahoro, 2023). In Aceh, poverty, family breakdown, and social

pressures drive children onto the streets (Hazimsyah, 2024; Ismi, 2023; Husna et al., 2023). Despite various rehabilitation programs, many return to the streets, indicating limited effectiveness of existing policies (Hazimsyah, 2024; ANTARA News, 2021). Therefore, research exploring the lived experiences and support needs of street children in Aceh are urgently required.

METHOD

This qualitative research employed purposive sampling with maximum variation (Patton, 2014) to capture diverse perspectives of street children, parents, and caregivers. Four groups participated: street children in Panti Asuhan (n=11), street children outside Panti Asuhan (n=10), parents (n=10), and staff/caregivers (n=10), totaling 41 participants. Inclusion criteria emphasized age (≤ 18 years), prior street experience, and consent from children and guardians. Recruitment involved collaboration with Panti Asuhan Dinas Sosial Aneuk Nanggroe, personal approaches, and informed consent/assent procedures.

Data collection combined in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis to explore experiences, support systems, and impacts. Observations (Nov 2023–Jan 2024) were conducted in orphanages and street sites, focusing on daily routines, coping strategies, and interactions. Field notes captured verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Data saturation determined the sample size, consistent with qualitative standards. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents enhanced validity and provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Transcribed interviews and field notes were read repeatedly to achieve immersion, and initial codes were generated inductively to capture meaningful patterns. Codes were then grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes reflecting participants' lived experiences and support systems. Constant comparison was applied across data sources to ensure consistency and depth. Manual coding was supported by reflective memo writing to maintain analytic rigor. Credibility and trustworthiness were reinforced through peer debriefing, member checking with selected participants, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the analysis process.

RESULT

A total of 41 participants were involved, including street children, shelter-home children, parents, and caregivers. Street children were mostly boys, aged 14–17, who dropped out of school and worked as beggars, buskers, vendors, or parking attendants. Poverty and family dysfunction such as divorce, domestic violence, and neglect were the main reasons they entered street life. Children living on the streets experienced exploitation, abuse, and social isolation. Some worked during the day and returned home at night, while others fully lived on the street. The culture of giving in Aceh, where alms are generously handed to children, unintentionally perpetuated their dependence and street presence.

In contrast, 11 children in the shelter home (Panti Asuhan) reported safety, schooling opportunities, and basic needs being met. However, they faced challenges of adaptation, emotional distress, and limited psychosocial support. Caregivers highlighted issues of children running away, lack of resilience, and difficulty adjusting to institutional rules. Parents of street children often had no education, unstable jobs, and survived by begging or collecting plastics. Caregivers and staff, despite years of experience, emphasized limited facilities, underfunding, and insufficient resources to provide holistic care. Five major factors were identified: family dysfunction, culture of giving, poverty, criminal exploitation, and weak institutional support. Placement in Panti Asuhan offered temporary protection but could not guarantee reintegration into society. Long-term outcomes remained fragile due to poor follow-up, inadequate funding, and lack of structured interventions. These findings show that street children in Aceh are trapped within cultural, economic, and systemic vulnerabilities. A holistic response strengthening families, promoting culturally sensitive community awareness, and developing trauma-informed institutional care is urgently needed. The findings of this study reveal that the vulnerability of street children in Aceh is shaped by five

interrelated factors: family dysfunction, culture of giving, poverty, criminal exploitation, and weak institutional support. The interplay of these factors is illustrated in the conceptual framework below.

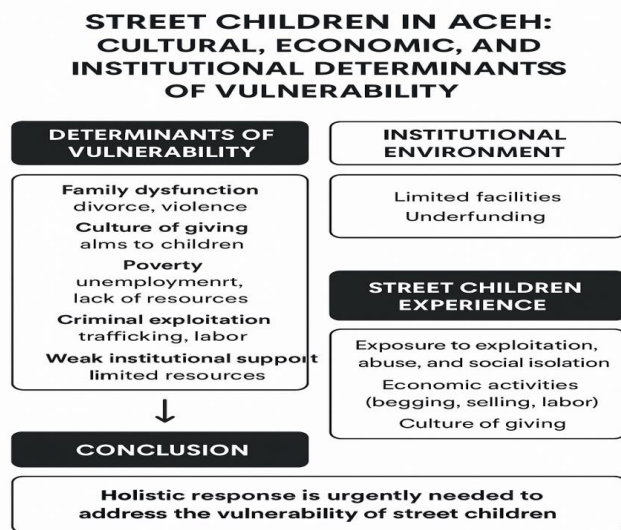


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Street children in Aceh

DISCUSSION

Family dysfunction emerged as a critical driver of street involvement. Parental divorce, domestic violence, and neglect left children without stable emotional and financial support, echoing the findings of Fitriani, Saidi, and Susanti (2024a, 2024b, 2025), who emphasized that family instability and weak social support systems increase the likelihood of children migrating to the streets in Aceh. In Aceh, these family vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by intergenerational poverty and limited access to social services, forcing children to adopt survival strategies in the street environment. The culture of giving, while rooted in Islamic values of almsgiving, unintentionally reinforces children’s dependency on street-based livelihoods. Participants described receiving daily income through begging and busking, which reduced incentives to remain in school or pursue structured work opportunities. This aligns with research suggesting that charitable practices, when unregulated, may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of street dependency (Ginting & Shofwan, 2021; Yusuf, 2023; Salwa, Nastia, & Achdiani, 2025).

Poverty was a pervasive factor shaping children’s trajectories. Parents’ limited education and unstable employment led families to rely on children’s contributions through street labor. This economic pressure blurred boundaries between child care and child exploitation, as parents normalized children’s involvement in street-based income generation. These findings reinforce global evidence that poverty is both a cause and consequence of street life (UNICEF, 2021). Another striking finding is criminal exploitation. Street children were exposed to risks such as trafficking, coercion, and physical abuse vulnerabilities that go beyond mere survival and show how street life can embed systematic harm (Beazley, 2015; Fitriani, Asniar, & Rahayuningsih, 2018). Finally, weak institutional support undermined sustainable reintegration, as shown in struggles over limited psychosocial support, underfunding, and inadequate coordination (Beazley, 2015).

The findings of this study carry several implications for child protection policies and service provision in Aceh and similar contexts. First, family strengthening should be prioritized through community-based parenting programs, counseling services, and social protection schemes that reduce the risk of child neglect and abandonment. Early interventions aimed at supporting families in crisis can prevent children from entering street life in the first place. Second, efforts are needed to reframe the culture of giving. While almsgiving remains a vital cultural and religious practice, it should be redirected toward sustainable forms of support such as community-based education

funds, vocational training, and social enterprises that empower children and their families rather than reinforce dependency on the street. Third, poverty alleviation strategies must integrate child protection objectives. Livelihood programs for parents, combined with accessible schooling and social assistance, are essential to reduce economic pressures that drive children into street labor. Fourth, policies should strengthen the protection of children from criminal exploitation. This requires robust child protection laws, effective law enforcement, and cross-sector collaboration between social workers, police, and civil society organizations to detect and respond to cases of trafficking, abuse, and coercion.

Finally, institutional care should evolve from custodial models toward trauma-informed, rehabilitative, and reiterative approaches. Investments in psychosocial services, staff training, and structured follow-up support after reintegration are crucial to ensure children's long-term well-being. Collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and religious institutions can enhance the sustainability and cultural appropriateness of these interventions. Overall, the findings emphasize that addressing the street children phenomenon requires multilevel interventions that simultaneously target families, communities, and institutions. Without coordinated action across these domains, street children in Aceh will continue to face cycles of vulnerability and marginalization.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay of emotional, psychological, and environmental factors influencing street children's return to street life. Strong familial bonds and attachments, even in unstable homes, act as key pull factors. Economic hardship and systemic gaps alone cannot explain street involvement. Emotional support, personal autonomy, and identity formation are crucial in rehabilitation. Effective interventions require holistic, multi-sectorial approaches. Family reintegration programs and community-based support are essential. Sustainable change involves combining material aid, education, and cultural awareness. Overall, lasting reintegration depends on addressing both individual needs and broader social systems.

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