

# **On the Border: A Exploration of the Experiences and Perspectives of Street-Involved Children on the Thai-Cambodian Border**

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## **Abstract**

The special economic and Free Trade Zone, which lies on the border between Poipet, Cambodia and Aranyaprathet, Thailand is an area where child street-involvement has proliferated. The area serves as the primary land-entry point between Thailand and Cambodia and has become synonymous for unsafe migration, trafficking, and various forms of exploitation. Despite this reality, there has been a lack of research on the needs and vulnerabilities of these groups. To address this issue, this study draws on primary data collected from 80 street-involved children living and/or working along the Thai-Cambodian border area of Poipet and Aranyaprathet and offers an initial analysis of their key needs, vulnerabilities, and potential resiliencies.

Children crossing the border for work into Thailand were found to have increased risk to various forms of violence, including arrest and detention. Children working on either side of the border cite high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional violence often perpetrated by a range of actors including: police, peers, adults, strangers and gang members. Sexual violence on the streets was cited by more than one-fourth of respondents and was nearly four times more prevalent among males in comparison to females. Despite this, neither males nor females seemed to perceive sexual violence as a danger for males. Drug use was also found to be a significant issue among street-involved boys in Poipet and was correlated with negative impacts on health, physical violence, sexual violence, and education. Drug use was also associated with higher experiences of physical violence.

This paper outlines a call to action for a more nuanced and informed discussion on the vulnerabilities of street-involved children and youth. It aims to provide an information resource for social service providers, policy makers, child protection advocates, and social researchers working with these groups throughout the region.

## **Introduction**

Poipet is located in the Northwest of Cambodia and serves as the main land-border crossing into Thailand from Cambodia. The Cambodian provinces bordering Thailand (Banteay Meanchey, Battambang and Oddar Meanchey) are cited to have some of the highest poverty levels in the country. This is suggested to have a direct impact on the high migration rates for this area, as well as the school dropout rates, which are among some of the highest in the nation<sup>1</sup>. Within some villages in this area, as many as 78% of families are cited to have at least one member who has migrated to Thailand<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>USAID (2011), School Dropout Prevention Program: Dropout Trend Analysis.

<sup>2</sup>Analysing Development Issues Centre (2003), Labour Migration to Thailand and the Thai-Cambodian Border Recent Trends in Four Villages of Battambang Province.

On the border between Cambodia and Thailand is a Special Economic Free Trade Zone (FTZ), in which the Cambodian and Thai governments allow for special business and trade laws to stimulate economic development. The FTZ has become popular for casinos, tourism, and trade between the countries, drawing economic migrants looking for income. Despite these hopes, opportunities for unskilled laborers are scarce—often leaving migrants in unstable economic conditions<sup>3</sup>. Further, such zones have been criticized for negative impacts including labor exploitation and poor working conditions<sup>4</sup> as well as contributing to the outgrowth of child sexual exploitation<sup>5</sup>.

Drug use and harmful alcohol consumption significantly increases the risks faced by children on the street due to a greater likelihood of participation in risk-taking behaviours<sup>6</sup>. These risks are further increased due to a lack of access to information on safer sex and harm reduction, and can thus lead to an increased threat of HIV/AIDS transmission<sup>7</sup>. In a systematic literature review of 108 articles on street-involved children in low and middle-income nations, substance use was the most common issue discussed with usage prevalence rates ranging from 35%-100%<sup>8</sup>. Common factors associated with substance use among street-involved children were: being male, being older in age, lacking family contact, depression, and previous experiences of abuse<sup>9</sup>.

Street-involved children are also an easy prey for gangs and violent groups. Despite having families, though relations are often fluid and mobile, attempts to recreate family structures and strong social ties with peers on the streets that substitute family are usual. This can be done by joining a gang, living in groups, or creating friendships through informal networks of other street children. Identifying to a group enables street-connected youth not only to gain status and satisfy their need for belonging, but also to find security, physical protection and emotional support<sup>10</sup>.

Research also suggests a significant link between drug use and sexual abuse. The impact of childhood sexual abuse is devastating and can include post-traumatic stress disorder, increased anxiety, depression, sexual promiscuity, or increased rates of suicide<sup>11</sup>. In this context, survivors have been found to resort to drug use as a coping mechanism, or form of “emotional avoidance” to numb the pain of the traumatic experience<sup>12</sup>. This connection was also found in previous research among street-involved children in Chiang Mai, in which living on the street, exposure to stress, the lack of emotional support were found to be

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<sup>3</sup> Fiss, J. (2013), Street children’s survey report in Poipet, Cambodia.

<sup>4</sup>The World Bank (2008), Special Economic Zones: Performance, Lessons Learned, and Implications for Zone Development.

<sup>5</sup> ECPAT International (2016), Regional Report on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism - Southeast Asia.

<sup>6</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse (2003), Preventing Drug-Use Among Children and Adolescents: A Research-Based Guide for Parents.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Woan, J. et al. (2013), *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53, pp. 314-321.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, (2013b)

<sup>10</sup> Urban Management Programme (2000), *Street children and Gangs in African Cities: Guidelines for Local Authorities*.

<sup>11</sup> Paolucci, E., et al. (2001), *A Meta-Analysis of the Published Research on the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse*.

<sup>12</sup> Polusny and Follette (1995), cited in Lalor, K. & McElvaney, R. (2010). *Child Sexual Abuse, Links to Later Sexual Exploitation/High-Risk Sexual Behavior, and Prevention/Treatment*.

contributing factors to the high rate of drug use among children living on the street<sup>13</sup>. For street-involved children, the exchange of sex for remuneration can become a necessary means for survival<sup>14</sup>. While Cambodia and Thailand are understood as key destinations for sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT), local offenders are often overlooked by national and international efforts against child sexual exploitation<sup>15</sup>. A recent baseline study on street-involved Children in Sihanoukville, Cambodia finds 18% of boys and 14% who cite providing sexual services to adults in exchange for various forms of remuneration<sup>16</sup> and in a similar study in Manila, more than one-fourth of boys disclose the same (Davis & Miles, 2015).

Recent prevalence studies on childhood experiences of violence in Cambodia and the Philippines (including sexual, emotional, and physical forms of violence) have shown boys to be more vulnerable to sexual violence in comparison with girls<sup>17</sup>. Despite this, boys in Southeast Asia are assumed more able to protect themselves, to recover more easily from trauma than girls. Further, the existence of male sexual abuse is often ignored or denied<sup>18</sup> and cases of abuse against boys are less likely to be reported<sup>19</sup>. Research on sexual violence against males in transitional contexts finds that even when male victims disclose, the sexual nature of their violence is often diminished with sexual violence commonly miscoded as physical violence<sup>20</sup> adding to their invisibility.

## Methods

### Research Sampling:

This study employs both purposive and chain-referral sampling methodologies to conduct 80 semi-structured interviews with Cambodian street-involved children on and around the Thai-Cambodian border in Poipet, Cambodia. The interviews were conducted by social work professionals from Damnok Toek<sup>21</sup> (DT), Cambodian organization and ChildSafe<sup>22</sup> member which has worked with vulnerable children and their families in Poipet since 2003.

Prior to collecting data, fieldwork and local mapping was conducted with local outreach staff and social workers to gain a more full understanding of the context and experiences of local

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<sup>13</sup>Davis, J., Fiss, J., & Miles, G. (2016). To Help My Parents: An Exploratory Study on the Hidden Vulnerabilities of Street-Involved Children and Youth in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

<sup>14</sup>Marshall, B. D., & Wood, E. (2009). Sex Work and Sex Exchange Among Street Children: An Urgent Need for a Global Response.

<sup>15</sup> ECPAT International (2016), Regional Report on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism - Southeast Asia.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, J., & Miles, G. (2014). "I want to be brave": A Baseline Study on the Vulnerabilities of Street-Working Boys to Sexual Exploitation in Sihanoukville; Davis, J., et al. (2017). Sexual violence among street-involved children in Southwest Cambodia.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2013), Findings from Cambodia's Violence Against Children Survey 2013; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2016), National Baseline Study on Violence against Children in the Philippines.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick, J. (2010). Sexual abuse and exploitation of boys in South Asia a review of research findings, legislation, policy and programme responses.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* (2010); Holmes, G. (1997). See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil: Why do relatively few male victims of childhood sexual abuse receive help for abuse-related issues in adulthood?

<sup>20</sup> International Center for Transitional Justice (2016), When No One Calls It Rape: Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on Damnok Toek and their work in Cambodia, see: <http://www.damnoktoek.org/html/>

<sup>22</sup> ChildSafe a global child protection movement. For more information see: <http://thinkchildsafe.org/>

street-based populations and key sectors where street-involved children could be found. Based upon this mapping, target sample sizes for location and gender were created.

For inclusion in the study respondents needed to be:

1. Street-working or street-living
2. Aged between 8 and 18 years old
3. Not living in a residential structure (NGO or government) nor benefiting from close case management from any social service provider
4. Freely consenting to participate
5. Not under the influence of substances
6. Having no identified risk of harm by participation in the interview.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All interviewers were practicing social workers from the local community and underwent ethical and research-focused child protection training with a licensed child trauma psychologist based on UNIAP Ethical Guidelines for Human Trafficking Research<sup>23</sup> (2008) prior to beginning data collection. During this training, role-playing and field testing exercises were utilized in order to familiarize interviewers with the research instrument, to aid them in empathizing them with the feelings of the child being ask questions, and to prepare them for situations in which they would need to make referrals for respondents.

During data collection, each interview was conducted as a semi-private dialogue between the respondent and social worker, to which each respondents gave verbal and written consent. Interviews were conducted in prearranged, safe locations which were identified through fieldwork prior to data gathering. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose and the nature of the questions and assured confidentiality. Respondents were informed that their names would never be recorded on the research form and that they would be able to stop the interview at anytime if they feel uncomfortable, or skip any question. Lastly, for respondents needing social services, legal protection, or health services either a direct referral was made, or referral information was made provided.

## **Research Instrument**

The questionnaire used for this study was a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions covering a variety of topics the life, context, and experiences of street-involved children with a particular focus on migration to Thailand, substance use, and experiences of violence. The initial foci for this baseline study were decided as an agreement between leadership of DT and up! international. The instrument was reviewed multiple times with the team of local social workers to ensure clarity, testing relevance, order of questions, and levels of comfort among the interviewers, whilst specifically taking in account cultural and linguistic subtleties unknown to the research coordinators who were not Cambodian..

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<sup>23</sup> United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (2008). Guide to ethics and human rights in counter-trafficking, Ethical standards for counter-trafficking research and programming.

# RESULTS

## Demographics

Ages of respondents ranged 10 years, the youngest being eight years of age and the oldest being 18, with an average age of 12.8 years. Seventy-five percent cite that they haven't attended school during the current school year and 25% that they have never attended school. The majority of respondents (63%) were born outside of Poipet and had migrated to the area. Migration to the Poipet area from elsewhere was more common among females (78%) in comparison with males (55%). Most commonly, respondents were born in other Cambodian provinces, including Phnom Penh (6 people), Siem Reap (6 people), Prey Veng (5 people), Pursat (5 people), Banteay Meanchey (4 people), Battambang (4 people), and Kampong Cham (3 people) among others (6 people). Four respondents were born outside of Cambodia, including three in Thailand and one in Vietnam.

On average respondents had been living in the Poipet area for 6.9 years, with the majority migrating for the purpose of begging (20 people or 48%) or to look for employment (12 people or 29%), indicating that poverty may be a driver for migration. Other reasons for migration mention include debts (3 people) and 'poverty' (3 people), among others. The majority (77%) cite that they migrated with their immediate family. Others cite migrating with extended family (13%), with siblings (4%), alone (4%), or with friends (2%).

## Caretakers & Homelife

The majority of children (73%) cite living with at least one biological parent and more than one third of respondents (35%) cite having at least one parent who had died. All females cite seeing their primary caretaker every day, in contrast with 75% of males. Among the 25% of males who do not see their caretaker every day, three cite they see their caretaker 'every couple of days', three cite 'once a week', and four cite 'every couple of weeks'.

Verbal violence from parents and/or caretakers was common with 80% of children citing instances in which they are yelled or cursed at in the home. The majority of these children (64%) cite being yelled at due to work with responses including, not working enough, not earning enough, being lazy, or not doing chores. To a lesser extent, 20% (5 children) cite verbal violence for not coming home, while three children cite verbal violence due to disobedience, and one cite violence when his caretaker becomes drunk.

With regard to emotional support the majority, or 75% are able to cite at least one person in their home or community they can go to when they are feeling angry or sad and 25% cite having no one. Among those who have someone for emotional support, 61% cite this is a family member and remaining 39% cite various members of their peer group.

## Housing

The majority of respondents, 84%, cite having a house to sleep in and 16% cite sleeping on the streets regularly. Among those living in houses, 72% live with family members and 12% live with non-family members. However, among the 84% who sleep in houses, only 20% do not sleep there regularly with 11% citing that they sleep there 4-6 nights a week and 9% say that they sleep there only 1-3 nights in a week. Taking these inconsistencies into account,

33% of respondents sleep on the streets at least sometimes—nearly double the number of respondents who initially cited sleeping on the street.

Sleeping on the streets is nearly twice as common among males with 40% of males (19 people) sleeping on the streets at least sometimes, in comparison to 20% among females (5 people). Four children cite street-sleeping because of late working hours, three cite street-sleeping to avoid violence at home, another three cite street-sleeping because nowhere else to sleep, and two cite street-sleeping because they are high, among other reasons.

### **Income Generation**

Begging was the most common type of work mentioned with slightly over half of children (53%) citing to engage in this type of work. Following begging, scavenging through trash for recyclable materials was cited amongst slightly more than one-in-five respondents (21%). Pulling carts across the border was mentioned by six (8%) children and selling items along the streets were mentioned by another six (8%) children. To a lesser extent ‘construction’ was mentioned by two children, ‘farming’ by two children, collecting grasshoppers by two children, ‘carrying pigs’ by one child, and ‘childcare’ by another one child. Overall, children cited working for an average of 6.8 hours a day, the minimum being 1.5 hours and the maximum 16 hours.

### **Migration**

#### **Crossing the border for work**

A strong majority of respondents (71%) cross the border into Thailand with nearly all respondents (45 people or 94%) crossing the border for income generation. Among those who crossed the border for work, females seem more likely to migrate to do specific work with 80% citing a variety of tasks or jobs that they would do across the border in order to earn money. Males, on the other hand tended to be more vague in their responses with 48% citing that they crossed the border “in search of money”.

Among those who crossed the border, only 21 people (45%) report crossing the border through the legal entrance into Thailand. Despite entering Thailand through the ‘legal’ entrance, it is uncertain as to whether these respondents actually enter legally. One respondent of the group who uses the legal entrance, cites that she passes through legal means by using a fake day pass. Anecdotal information from field practitioners indicates that the usage of fake passes may be more common than indicated by this data.

#### **Parent migration**

The majority, or 60% of respondents (43 people), cite that their parents migrate to Thailand for work. In all but three cases, the parents migrate and leave the children behind in Cambodia. When migrating to Thailand for work, children described their parents to be gone for a varying lengths of time. For the majority of respondents, 11 people (30%), their parents are gone only during the day and return in the evenings. Yet, for another significant group of respondents, 10 people are 27%, their parents seemed to be gone indefinitely with respondents indicating that they had left a long time ago and did not give an indication as to when they may return. Similar to this group, four people (11%) cite that their parents left over one year ago and give no definite time as to when they may be back. For the remainder of respondent’s parents, six people (16%) cite that their parents visit from Thailand on a

yearly basis, four people (11%) cite their parents are gone for 1-6 months at a time, while two respondents (5%) cite that their parents are just gone for a few days at a time.

Given the sometimes long absences of parents, it was significant to find out who takes care of respondents while their parents are away. For 15 respondents (41%), there is another parent who looks after the child, 12 people (32%) cite that they are taken care of by a grandparent or a sibling, and eight people (22%) cite that they are left on their own while their parents are gone.

## **Violence**

### **Physical Violence**

Two in three/ Two-thirds? of children (66%) cite experiencing various forms of physical violence on the streets (69% of males; 60% of females). Perpetrators of violence include parents, cited by 26% (15% of males; 58% of females); gangs, cited by 24% (31% of males; 5% of females), other adults, cited by 17% (19% of males; 11% of females) and police, 17% (all males, or 22% of males). Further, 31% of children cite instances in which they had been hurt or threatened with a weapon during their work on the streets (36% of males; 24% of females).

A strong majority of children (70%) cite being afraid that someone would kill or injure them on the street (74% of males; 63% of females). ‘Adults’ and/or ‘drug users’ were most commonly mentioned with 14 children (29%) mentioning fears of adults and 14 children (29%) mentioning fears of drug users. Following this, seven children (14%) cite fears of gangs (17% of males; 7% of females), among others.

### **Perception of vulnerability to violence**

Boys and girls were asked what they perceive to be the key dangers for girls on the street and what they perceived to be the key dangers for boys. The most common perception about girls was that they were vulnerable to rape, mentioned by nine people. In particular, children commonly specified rape by drug users on the streets. Secondly, children perceive the girls were vulnerable to being hit by cars, mentioned by four people. Another four children cited the girls have faced similar dangers to boys on the street. And lastly, three people cite the girls were in danger of being trafficked, and two cited that they were in danger of arrest. With regard to the dangers for boys, the most common responses included dangers of being beaten, mentioned by six people, and being hit by cars, also mentioned by six people. Further, four people cited that boys faced similar dangers to girls. Lastly, two people cite boys were in danger of arrest, and two believed them to be in danger of being robbed.

### **Sexual violence**

Sixteen children, or 23%, cite instances in which an adult had touch them inappropriately in the genital area. This was more frequently cited among males, with 14 males (31%) citing sexual touching and two females (8%) citing sexual violence. Among the 16 people who describe sexual touching by an adult, 11 cite that this had taken place between one and five times (10 males and one female). Further, one respondent cites that happens to him ‘all the time’ or ‘regularly’. Seven children, or 11%, describe experiences of sexual violence that have gone beyond just touching, including four children (all male) who cite instances of being physically forced to do something sexual.

## **Substance use**

Glue (huffing) and methamphetamine users were nearly all male with the exception of one female glue-user who cites using glue ‘sometimes’. Glue was used by 18 males (40% of males; or 27% of all children). The average age children began using glue was 10.8 years of age with the youngest being six when he first started and the oldest being 14 years of age. Twelve males (29% of males; 18% of all children) cite methamphetamines use. The average age that boys began using methamphetamines is 12.6 years of age, with the youngest being eight when he first started and the oldest being 16 years of age.

Seventeen males (49%) cite that they have tried to stop using drugs in the past and 19 (59%) cite that they currently want to stop using drugs. Among those who have tried to stop using drugs, six cite that they have tried to stop using glue, and five cite that they have tried to stop using methamphetamines. Among male users, six (43%) believe that staying at home or having a greater connection with their family would help them to stop using drugs.

## **Discussion**

### **Crossing the border for work**

While the majority of children cross the border into Thailand in search of various economic opportunities, most seem to stay within the border area and do not migrate further into Thailand. Children crossing the border often do so during the day—sometimes staying overnight—and engage in various forms of street-work. There are notable vulnerabilities to violence indicated among these groups, in particular, to physical and sexual violence. In addition to the 14 children (26%) who cite physical violence from police, qualitative data echoes experiences of violence from Thai police and security guards in Thailand. Further, children who cross into Thailand for work are 2.1 times more likely to report physical violence (78.1% versus 36.4%) and 4.1 times more likely to report being hurt or threatened by a weapon (37.7% versus 9.1%) in comparison with those who solely work on the Cambodian side of the border.

### **Arrest, Detention, and Repatriation:**

There is no official ‘deportation center’ on the Thai-Cambodian border. Instead, children detained are often brought to the Immigration Office in Aranyaprathet and held until they can be repatriated. This office is also responsible for the daily reception of undocumented Cambodians from all over Thailand. Children detained here are mixed with a wide variety of undocumented persons awaiting repatriation. Undocumented and unaccompanied children working further into Thailand are likely to be brought to one of the detention centers throughout Thailand and held until enough undocumented Cambodians have been detained to fill a deportation truck (usually 60-80 people). These people are then brought to the border Immigration Office for repatriation.

Twenty-five children (45%) cite being arrested in Thailand— more than half of whom cite detainment at the border. Four children— all males— describe being beat by police upon their arrest. This is consistent with anecdotal accounts during initial focus-group discussion where males threat by police using weapons and one describing being thrown from a roof. While females are much less likely to indicate physical violence from police, they are more likely describe detainment (31% of females; 19% of males).

## Migration to Thailand

While few street-involved children seem to migrate deeper into Thailand, the majority (60%) have parents who do—often leaving the children alone or with limited supervision. Among those children whose parents had migrated, 24% are left alone and 18% are left with a sibling while their parents are out of the country for work, which leaving children vulnerable to increased risks while on the streets. Among children left alone or with a sibling, all but one (92%) indicate experiences of physical violence, largely from older youth, police, and other adults. More than half (53%) of children whose parents migrate indicate their parents are gone for at least a month at a time, with more than a third indicating that they are unsure of when their parents will return.

A stable family serves as a protective factor in terms of overcoming emotional distress in future life and favoring resilience<sup>24</sup>. Children in these situations may be unable to develop strong and consistent bonds with their family due to the high rate of parent migration and feel isolated or disconnected from their families/caretakers, resorting to street-involved peer groups and/or substances use as a means of recreating ‘family’ ties within their peer groups.

## Substance Use

Drug use was highly correlated to physical violence with 95% of drug-using children citing instances of physical violence in comparison to 54% among non-users. Violence is from gangs (cited by 68%), police (cited by 50%), and ‘other adults’ (cited by 41%). Sexual violence is also strongly correlated with 68% of drug-using children citing sexual violence in comparison with 10% among non-users. Further, 73% of children who use drugs cite being shown pornographic images by adults in comparison with 18% of non-drug-using children. This is significant in that pornography is commonly used by perpetrators of CSEA to groom children for sexual exploitation<sup>25</sup>. This is supported by nearly one-third (30%) of drug users who cite being offered food, money, or gifts in exchange for providing sexual services to adult, in comparison to 4% of non drug users. This link between sexual violence and use of substances was also clear in a previous study carried out in Chiang Mai<sup>26</sup>, where the rates of sexual abuse toward drug-users was found to be significantly higher in comparison with those that were not consuming any substances.

In addition to high rates of violence, family/social connection is notably lower among drug-users in Poipet. Drug users are significantly less likely to stay with family members at night (28.6% versus 66% among non-users) and significantly more likely to sleep on the streets (43% versus 9% among non-users). Further the majority drugs using children, or 78%, cite turning to friends, peers, or gang members when they feel angry or sad and 16% (three children) cite that they have no one to go to. In contrast, the majority of non-drug using children, or 77% cite a variety of family members including parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and step-parents in whom they find emotional support. Positive parental

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<sup>24</sup> United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (2012). *The State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World*.

<sup>25</sup> Fordham, G. (2005). “Wise” before their time: Young people, gender-based violence and pornography in Kandal Stung District.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, J., Fiss, J., & Miles, G. (2016). *To Help My Parents: An Exploratory Study on the Hidden Vulnerabilities of Street-Involved Children and Youth in Chiang Mai, Thailand*.

involvement in a child's life and having financial, emotional, cognitive, and social needs met are factors proven to prevent substance use issues in children<sup>27</sup>.

It is important for street-involved children to establish a sense of belonging and connectedness to others in their family and community. Further, recovery from addiction, as well as preventing new addictions, often lies in attempts to reconnect people with others and break the sense of isolation. This seems to be indicated in Poipet with more than a third of children (36%) citing staying at home or having an improved connection with their families as helpful stopping drug use.

## **Violence**

### **Gender and Sexual Violence**

While sexual violence was nearly four times more prevalent among males in comparison to females (31% versus 8%), neither males nor females seemed to perceive sexual violence as a danger for males. Among both genders, the key danger for males was assumed to be physical forms of violence, such as being hit by cars, and the key danger for females was assumed to be rape—particularly rape by drug abusers. These perceptions about gender and vulnerability/invulnerability are likely due to the prevalent social constructs of masculinity and femininity, which tend to view females and physically weak and less capable of taking care of themselves and men as strong, fit, and more self-sufficient. In view of this, male victimization undermines these overarching ideals of masculinity<sup>28</sup>. Even in focus group discussions prior to data gathering, boys described similar assumptions that they were less vulnerable on the streets because they “were more clever” than girls and thus knew how to run away from potential dangers. It is valuable to consider how these assumptions could impact the supervision and general protection offered to males and females by families and/or caretakers. In future research, it would be helpful to explore the impact of such assumptions on male vulnerability to sexual violence, particularly among street-involved children.

### **Gangs and Violence**

Children within this study frequently describe violence from gang members and gangs are cited as a clear source of insecurity and violence. Despite the frequent mention of violence from gang members, only a small number of youth, three boys aged 13-18 years of age, cite living with gang members. Among this group of three, all cite sleeping on the street, two have never attended school and one cites that he has not attended school for nearly 10 years. All three indicate daily use of drugs including glue-based inhalants and crystal methamphetamines.

The drive for participation in a gang can come from a need to establish identity, physical security, and emotional support—a need which can be particularly meaningful among youth coming from broken or chaotic family environments. Establishing a new identity once on the street can enable children to transcend the stigmatising label of “street children”, and give positive meaning to often-difficult experiences by providing a sense of belonging<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>National Institute on Drug Abuse (2003), Preventing Drug-Use Among Children and Adolescents: A Research-Based Guide for Parents.

<sup>28</sup> Weiss, K. G. (2010), Male sexual victimization: Examining men's experiences of rape and sexual assault.

<sup>29</sup> Beazley, H. (2003), Subcultures in Indonesia.

Identifying to a group enables street-connected youth not only to gain status and satisfy their need for belonging, but also to find security, physical protection and emotional support<sup>30</sup>.

## Recommendations

In view of these findings, the following is broadly recommended for organizations, governments, and future research:

Children's rights organizations are encouraged to employ a mixed-range of strategies focused on community-building and social connectedness to help lessen drug use and improve the lives of street-involved children, this could be done through peer-mentorship initiatives targeting children whose parents migrate and leave their children alone or who are otherwise absent. Monks, community leaders, and NGOs should work together to provide spaces for children to meet together in youth and children's groups with positive peer pressure. In addition, research on the children left behind by migrating parents is needed to explore the potential disconnect felt by children and its impact with regard to substance use issues and other negative coping mechanisms

Children's rights organizations should work to build stronger relations with law enforcement officials on the border, advocating for the rights of children—especially their treatment of street-involved and/or drug-using children. Future research should explore the experiences of Cambodian children who are arrested and detained in Thailand, exploring the connections between arrest, child trauma, and negative coping strategies.

There is a need to develop and utilize strong local educational resources normalizing the vulnerabilities sexual violence among both genders, countering existing cultural assumptions and future research should explore the impact of patriarchal gender assumptions on male vulnerability to sexual violence.

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