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What works in addressing the needs of street-connected children and young people

Street-connected children and young people (SCCYP)¹ are vulnerable to a range of risks. Their exclusion from mainstream opportunities, such as education and employment, as well as settled relationships may impede their long-term life chances.

A 3ie-funded systematic review examined the evidence on the effectiveness of interventions for improving opportunities for SCCYP and reducing the risks of adverse outcomes. Studies looked at interventions to promote access and reintegration into employment, education and training opportunities and interventions promoting more healthy and settled lifestyles.

Main findings

- Overall, SCCYP participating in new therapeutic programmes did not have better outcomes than SCCYP receiving usual services. The review suggests that young people using services are choosing to accept support and have therefore already made a decision to change their lives.
- Family therapies with runaway or newly homeless youth appeared particularly

effective for certain outcomes related to substance use and delinquent behaviour.

- The thematic synthesis showed that SCCYP were more receptive to services that proved challenging and were tailored to their needs and goals.
- Peer outreach may have a potentially beneficial impact on service engagement, particularly with targeted sexual health interventions.
- Girls, young women and those with severe substance abuse were more difficult to engage with services.
- There were shortcomings in the professional and material support available to service providers in low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs). Practitioners reported a lack of competence in reaching out to street-connected girls and young women.

What is a systematic review?

3ie-funded systematic reviews use rigorous and transparent methods to identify, appraise and synthesise all of the relevant studies to address a specific review question. Review authors search for published and unpublished studies and use a theory-based approach to say what evidence is generalisable and what is more context-specific. The result is an unbiased assessment of what works, for whom and why.

About the systematic review: This brief is based on *Interventions for promoting reintegration and reducing harmful behaviour and lifestyles in street-connected children and young people: a systematic review*, 3ie systematic review 12 by Esther Coren, Rosa Hossain, Jordi Pardo, Mirella MS Veras, Kabita Chakraborty, Holly Harris and Anne J Martin. It includes evidence from 11 studies evaluating 12 interventions from high-income countries (Korea, UK and US) which used a comparison group study design. There were no sufficiently rigorous studies that could be identified from L&MICs. The included studies compared new therapeutic interventions, such as group-based cognitive behavioural therapy and behavioural family therapy, with the usual services offered at drop-in centres or shelters such as rooms, free meals, clothes, health and counselling services. A follow-up thematic synthesis looked at evidence from 27 qualitative and mixed-methods studies. These studies look at the role of service-related process factors, particularly the means of engaging SCCYP with services in L&MICs.

¹ The authors of this review define SCCYP as those who work and/or sleep on the streets and may or may not be adequately supervised by responsible adults. They define reintegration as SCCYP entering an educational or residential environment. Reintegration does not mean returning SCCYP to the situations from which they may have escaped.

Implications

Policy and programming

- In most cases in high-income countries, therapeutic interventions did not produce better results than regular service delivery, which suggests need for planning better service delivery.
- Tailoring services to the skills, needs and aspirations of the service users can help SCCYP feel valued and recognised. Such tailored outreach strategies and interventions are particularly useful for those who are harder to target, such as girls, young women and those with severe substance abuse.
- Service providers need adequate and appropriate material and professional support to deliver services, including funding, training, management and supervision.

Research

- Little or no evidence exists on the effectiveness of services for SCCYP in L&MICs, even though several relevant programmes exist in these countries.
- There is a need for well-designed impact evaluations assessing the effects of programmes targeting SCCYP. Such studies should also explicitly define and evaluate the processes of service engagement and delivery.
- More participatory research is needed to incorporate the views and priorities of SCCYP, which can help inform the design of future interventions.
- The thematic synthesis points toward the lack of evidence concerning interventions attempting to engage families or members of the community, including the police, who play key roles in the lives of SCCYP.



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