

# HEADCOUNTING

A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO COUNTING  
STREET-CONNECTED CHILDREN:  
LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND



“Often, data are not systematically collected or disaggregated, so it is not known how many children are in street situations...The absence of data makes these children invisible, which leads to policies not being developed or measures that are ad hoc, temporary or short-term. This results in the persistence of multiple rights violations that force children onto the streets and that continue when children are on the streets. These issues concern every State.”

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child  
General Comment No. 21 (2017) on Children in Street Situations

## INTRODUCTION

Street-connected children exist in every country of the world yet the lack of systematically collected and disaggregated data means **we do not know how many there are**. Estimates fluctuate according to the methodologies and definitions used that reflect socioeconomic, political or other conditions.

The lack of a standard methodology for counting them results in data which is contested and which lacks credibility. The absence of this data **makes these children invisible**, which leads to policies not being developed or measures that are ad hoc, temporary or short-term.<sup>1</sup>

It should be borne in mind that the majority of these children have already experienced multiple rights violations of their rights *before* spending time on the streets, whether at home or in care, including in institutions such as orphanages, detention centres, rehabilitation centres and juvenile justice institutions.<sup>2</sup> Once on the street, they face abuse, stigma, discrimination and appalling violations of their rights.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges that 'no one will be left behind' yet a data gap exists: the number of street-connected children is not known. The issue is that key populations such as street connected children and youth *are* being left behind.

These groups are left behind because they are not counted in traditional censuses and household surveys as done by National Statistical Offices, and there is limited investment and commitment to make use of innovative methods which are required to count them. Often without any form of legal identity, these children are exposed to multiple rights violations through their political invisibility and anonymity.

Action is urgently needed: unless they are counted, street-connected children will remain invisible on the political agenda.

StreetInvest's headcounting methodology has been recognised as the sector-preferred approach to counting street-connected children<sup>3</sup>. The

methodology seeks to provide a standardised, scalable, rights-respecting approach to collecting quantitative data on the number of street-connected children in a specified geographical location. This data can be disaggregated by age, gender, disability and activities. The analysis and dissemination of this data is to inform the design of policies and programmes for street-connected children.

The headcount methodology was pioneered by StreetInvest's founder, Father Patrick Shanahan, in Ghana in the 1980s and 1990s and has since been used by a range of partners, including UNICEF, to deliver headcounts in: Democratic Republic of Congo; Ethiopia; India; Tanzania; Ghana; Uganda and Kenya. The Sierra Leone headcount in 2011 was the first national headcount of street-connected children that has been conducted and a repeat national headcount is being conducted in 2019.

## WHO ARE WE COUNTING?

There is no international consensus on how many street connected children there are globally. An often cited estimate from UNICEF from 1989 of 100 million street children has, along with numerous other local and national estimates, been widely discredited for having little basis in fact and for lacking reference to any counting methodologies. The number of 100 million was restated in 2002<sup>4</sup> and more recently a number of 150 million children in street situations has been used by UN agencies, again with no reference to how this number was reached.

These 'guesstimates' that are often used to convey urgency are problematic because it is not the scale that is important, it is the multiple violations of their rights that require a coordinated response. Sometimes numbers have been manipulated or inflated by NGOs to attract funding<sup>5</sup>. Further, alarmist national and local 'guesstimates' can provoke governments into launching high profile programmes and interventions based on insufficient data and misguided expectations that are certain to fail<sup>6</sup>, and they can lead to repressive

<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (2017), *General comment No. 21 on children in street situations*, New York, UN and Consortium for Street Children (2015), *Do I Count If You Count Me? CSC Briefing Paper*, London, CSC

<sup>2</sup> OHCHR (2012), *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the street*, Geneva, OHCHR

<sup>3</sup> Consortium for Street Children (2015), *Do I Count If You Count Me? CSC Briefing Paper*, London, CSC

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2002), *State of the World's Children 2003: Child Participation*, New York, UNICEF

<sup>5</sup> J. Ennew, (1994), *Street and working children – A guide to planning*, London, Save the Children

<sup>6</sup> Thomas de Benitez, Sarah (2011), *State of the World's Street Children: Research*, London, CSC

actions for the government to be seen ‘to be doing something about the problem’.

Part of the problem with getting accurate numbers on children in street-situations comes from issues around defining who they are. Not having a universally accepted definition obviously causes a problem with respect to counting them. There has been an evolution over time of how this group of children is defined. In the 1980s UNICEF adopted a definition of a street child as: ‘...any girl or boy... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults’<sup>7</sup>.

This definition focused on time spent on the streets and, the street as source of livelihood and lack of protection and care of adults. It did however raise questions such as what is adequate protection. It also seemed to exclude children that will live with their family but still depend on the street for their livelihood and include young people in child-headed households who is a households main earner and depend on the street for their livelihood but not consider him/herself to be a ‘street child’.

UNICEF added further categorisations of children ‘of the streets’ e.g. children who live on the streets, and children ‘in the streets’ e.g. children who work on the streets during the day but have somewhere to sleep at night. The former term generally meaning children who live on the streets or ‘street-living’ children, the latter meaning children who work on the streets during the daytime and return home to their families at night – or ‘street-working’ children.

The problem is that the children themselves defy these categories as their lives are not static. Many switch between sleeping at home and on the street depending on the season and situation, or are periodically in institutions. It is however useful to distinguish between street-living and street-working children to get an understanding of the number of children who at any one point sleep on the streets.

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<sup>7</sup> UNCHS (Habitat) (2000), *Strategies to combat homelessness*, Nairobi, UNHCS

<sup>8</sup> Thomas de Benitez, S., & Hiddleston, T. (2011). *Research paper on the promotion and protection of the rights of children working and/or living on the street: OHCHR 2011 Global Study*, Geneva, OHCHR.

The Consortium for Street Children started emphasising connections in relation to street children<sup>8</sup> and the term ‘street connected children and youth’ was adopted by the UNHCHR in a report in 2012<sup>9</sup>. A street-connected child is understood as a child for whom the street is a central – the most central - reference point – one which plays a very significant role in his/her everyday life and identity. Young people who are street-connected depend on the streets to live and/or work, whether alone, with peers, or with family, periodically or more long term. This definition aligned more closely children’s experiences with rights-based approaches.

Finally, in General Comment No. 21 on Children in Street Situations from 2017, “the term ‘*children in street situations*’ is used to comprise: (a) children who depend on the streets to live and/or work, whether alone, with peers or with family; and (b) a wider population of children who have formed strong connections with public spaces and for whom the street plays a vital role in their everyday lives and identities. This wider population includes children who periodically, but not always, live and/or work on the streets and children who do not live or work on the streets but who regularly accompany their peers, siblings or family in the streets.”<sup>10</sup>

It is this definition that is adopted for the purpose of the headcounting methodology.

## A CHILD RIGHTS APPROACH

In a child rights approach the process of realising children’s rights is as important as the end result. A child rights approach ensures respect for the dignity, life, survival, wellbeing, health, development, participation and non-discrimination of the child as a rights-holder.

The approach uses rights standards and principles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments to guide behaviour, actions, policies and programmes, paying particular attention to the General Principles of the UNCRC:

<sup>9</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2012). *Report on protection and promotion of the rights of children working and/or living on the street*, Geneva, OHCHR

<sup>10</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (2017), *General comment No. 21 on children in street situations*, New York, UN

- Non-discrimination
- Best interests of the Child
- Life, survival and development
- Right to be heard and taken seriously

It should be noted that StreetInvest will only be involved with, or allow its methodology to be used by, organisations who is committed to a child rights approach and who can demonstrate that in their documentation and practice.

The below table gives an overview of the key differences between a rights based approach and welfare and repressive approaches.

Approach	Welfare	Repressive	Rights
<b>Perceptions</b>	Adults know best: adult control and supervision is necessary to ensure street children’s welfare		Street children create meanings for using street spaces and form supportive networks. They have changing careers on the streets, and their increasing age is a factor
<b>Theory</b>	Street children are homeless and abandoned: they are victims	Street children’s lives are chaotic: they are, or will become, delinquents or criminals	Children are the experts in their own lives: they are active agents, construct means, and are rights holders
<b>Practice</b>	Children are removed from the street for their own protection	Children are removed from the street to protect society	The street becomes a space for programming informed by the experience, strengths and connections of the child. Programmes are long-term and engage with the evolving capacities of the child to secure their optimal development

## HEADCOUNTING

Headcounting is the process of determining numbers of children in street situations in a given geographical area. A number of methodologies has been used in various studies. What follows are brief descriptions of two of the most common methodologies and how the observational methodology promoted by StreetInvest differs from these.

**Capture-recapture:** this methodology was designed to count wildlife populations. The capture phase involves data on a sample of the population being collected. Then a recapture is done in the same location. The sample numbers are then multiplied together and divided by the amount of new subjects in the re-capture. The process can be repeated to improve the accuracy and the more re-captures that are done the more robust the survey is.<sup>11</sup> Limitations of the methodology is that the environment may change between the time of the capture and the re-capture. Some surveys may use existing capture data e.g. lists of street children previously sampled. This opens the re-capture up to biases and limitations of the children left out of the first count. Those who have been captured must be registered so that they can be identified in the re-capture. This can pose problems because street connected children can be reluctant to provide accurate details to a researcher, and may provide different details in the capture and recapture. Issues with spelling and data recording may also compromise the accuracy of the count.

### Census:

A census combines a headcount with surveys and interviews, and gathers both quantitative and qualitative data. The aim of a census is to gather data on the whole population in a given geographical area. It works well with household surveys where information on all people within a household is gathered. It works less well with a highly mobile and elusive population that frequently are not to be found in a standard household captured in household surveys conducted by national statistics offices. Like in capture-recapture it is prone to the same unreliability of the data from the street connected children due to their scepticism or inability to provide accurate

<sup>11</sup> Hatloy A., Huser A. (2005) *Identification of Street Children: Characteristics of Street Children in Bamako and Accra*, Allkopi, Oslo

information to researchers. This can be mitigated and a census can work well in limited areas where an NGO doing a census is well established and well-known by the target population. The sample would however be biased towards those already known by the NGO, and many could be missed out<sup>12</sup>. In areas where there are no established NGOs that is well known to the street-connected children, the chances of reaching an accurate and realistic number is low.

### **Observational headcount:**

This is a method of counting where teams of counters visit pre-determined areas and count the number of children in street situation they see. This is the basis of the methodology developed by StreetInvest. It is different to other methodologies in that it is purely observational and there is no direct interaction between the researchers and the children.

## THE METHODOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

StreetInvest's headcount methodology is a process of **observation and reflection**: seeking to provide quantitative data on all observed street-connected children within a geographic locality at a specific point in time. No form of sampling, estimations or averages are used.

Before the headcount, the counters determine the criteria they will use to identify who a street-connected child is and therefore who will be counted. Age-ranges and types of activities the children engaged in when counted are also pre-defined. The area to be counted is divided into sections, and teams of counters go to each location to conduct the count. The teams then swap sections. The entire group then comes together and compares the results, rigorously debating numbers and recording information which could influence the counting results. A third and final count is then conducted to produce the final number.

The methodology requires an in-depth knowledge of the streets and the areas street-connected children use to satisfy their life, survival and development needs. Therefore the counting teams should as far as possible consist of people from the area who have a

strong familiarity of the streets and the children who are there. Every team must also have at least one local street/ social worker with extensive experience of working with the street connected children, who are at ease with, and knowledgeable about, the children in the area. This experience of the street connected children and the understanding of the location and the culture is crucial for any successful intervention<sup>13</sup>.

### **"Count what the eye sees."**

The counting is done in stages of day time and night time counts. This is done so that one group verifies figures from the other group's first count as a means of scrutinising the process: all groups figures are checked and probed.

The methodology seeks to provide data on all observed street-connected children within a geographic locality. The focus on *observation* eschews some of the statistical dogma that is associated with many quantitative studies such as surveys, census, and sampling.

### **Training**

All counters take part in a four day training workshop on the counting methodology, observation skills, data collection tools and reflective practice. Challenges and risks and how to mitigate them are workshopped. There are also sessions on child rights and how to work using child centred and rights based practice. Trial counts are done exposing the counters to the reality of the streets and these are followed by practicing discussions that are an essential part of the methodology. Prior to the trial counts the group discusses and confirms the definition, age ranges and categorisation of activities to be utilised in the count. The teams are trained in how to identify the street connected children according to the agreed definitions.

StreetInvest is an experienced accredited training organisation who has delivered training to over 2,000 street workers in over 40 organisations in 20 countries. StreetInvest has training modules in Introduction to Street Work, Working with Girls, One-to-one Engagement and Headcounting. The training was evaluated by the University of Ulster who found the

<sup>12</sup> Consortium for Street Children (2015), *Do I Count If You Count Me? CSC Briefing Paper*, London, CSC  
<sup>13</sup> McEvoy, D, S Morgan, S McCready, J Bennett and P Heany (2013)  
'Working with Street-Connected Children: A Training Model

for Street Work Practice', *Practice: Social Work in Action*, 25(4), pp233-250

training to be of high quality, credible and professional which resulted in an increased competence and confidence recognised by the workers themselves<sup>14</sup>.

“Even when people are counted, the counting is frequently not good enough. What is assumed to be an empirical fact – a statistic – is too often the result *not of direct observation* but of inference, assumptions, extrapolation, or political negotiation.<sup>15</sup>”

### Data collection and analysis

Each member of the team counts their assigned categories of street connected children. The numbers are noted down on paper forms, which are transferred to electronic format at the end of a count. The data is discussed and reviewed by the team. The first two counts in part act as a learning process prior to the third count which produces the final numbers. The data from count one and two is used for validation of the final findings by comparing the data to identify any significant discrepancies. The data is then checked and cleaned before analysis.

The quantitative analysis of the final numbers is done by one-way tabulations to obtain the distribution of the counts across the categories of each variable. Bivariate analysis is done to compare and contrast the counts by gender, age and type of activities across the areas of the count. Results are presented in frequency distribution tables, bar and pie charts. Following the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis of the findings are conducted to explain and contextualise the findings.

### A RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO COUNTING STREET CONNECTED CHILDREN

Headcounting should be recognised as part of a broader programme cycle whereby high-quality quantitative and qualitative research and data is used to inform evidence-based decision-making: it is not a stand alone exercise. The authoritative guidance set out by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment No.21 (2017) on Children in Street Situations makes explicit that, while States should collect and share disaggregated

information about street-connected children, they must ensure that **the collection and use of such information does not stigmatize or harm these children.**<sup>16</sup>

Relying on purely quantitative data risks reinforcing the characterisation of children as ‘out of place’ on the street, creating a problematic view of children as a hazard or vulnerable. This in turn perpetuates a simplistic binary where ‘on’ the street represents danger or a departure from normative social behaviours, and ‘off’ the street is indicative of problems resolved and therefore regarded as a legitimate objective for policy formation or output for service intervention.<sup>17</sup>

This fails to take into consideration the individuality of the child or recognise the significant role the street plays in their survival and development, and in shaping their identities.

### Lack of trust

The observational approach of StreetInvest’s headcount methodology does not allow street-connected children to participate in setting the aims and agendas of the counts, in the data collection, or in analysing and disseminating the findings. This is, however, a critical feature of the methodology which recognises that street-connected children are often distrustful of adult intervention in their lives. It is therefore crucial that the numbers established through the headcount is both supported by qualitative data and research which reflects the realities of their lives and experiences, and that it is used to develop a process through which these children can participate in the decision-making process:

**Kenya. The Sierra Leone headcount in 2011 was the first national headcount of street-connected children that has been conducted and a repeat national headcount is being conducted in 2019.**

Put simply: Numbers are not enough.

<sup>14</sup> Henry, P., S. Morgan & S.McCready (2010) Turning on a light: An evaluation of street work training in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo. London: StreetInvest and the University of Ulster.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart, E. and Samman, E. (2015) *The data revolution-Finding the missing millions*, Research Report 03, London, ODI

<sup>16</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child (2017), General comment No. 21 on children in street situations, New York, UN 17 Growing up on the Streets (2014), Briefing Paper 1 Research Principles and Conceptual Frameworks, Dundee



“Data are not just about measuring changes, they also facilitate and catalyse that change. Of course, good quality numbers will not change people’s lives in themselves. But to target the most marginalised systematically, even the most willing governments cannot efficiently deliver services if they do not know who those people are, where they live and what they need. Nor do they know where their resources will have the greatest impact.”<sup>18</sup>

### THE HEADCOUNT PROCESS

This document provides an overview of StreetInvest’s headcount methodology: for organisations who have not previously implemented a headcount, or one of the planned scale, the process can seem daunting. StreetInvest has the experience and expertise to lead the organisation through all stages of the headcount.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart, E. and Samman, E. (2015) *The data revolution-Finding the missing millions*, Research Report 03, London, ODI

## Preparation

- Scale (local, national, regional)
- Scope (number of sites to be counted)
- Resources (number of counters, budget)
- Collaboration (organisations & stakeholders to involve)
- Timing (season, situational analysis etc.)
- Legalities (permissions etc.)

## Planning

- Scoping
- Participant selection
- Training planning and schedule
- Training delivery
- Area mapping
- Team selection (counters & supervisors)
- Agreement of counting categories

## Implementation

- Observation
- Data collection
- Group interactions, discussion and consultation
- Risk management

## Development

- Data analysis
- Report
- Dissemination

## CHECKLIST OF THE REQUIREMENTS

EXAMPLE PROVIDED IS FOR MAJOR CITY - 1 MILLION+ POPULATION

<b>PREPARATION</b>	<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>
Scale	Local - 1 city
Scope	8 sites in the city determined by lead agency in dialogue with key stakeholders
Resources	8 teams of 6 = 48 counters - see budget example below
Collaboration	Local government, Child Welfare Committees (CWC), Police, Unicef, street children focused NGOs
Timing	Avoiding rainy season. Situational analysis conducted by lead partner
Legalities	Permissions from local government and police
<b>PLANNING</b>	<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>
Participant selection	48 Participants selected from NGOs, CWCs, local gov
Training planning and schedule	Training booked week prior to count, participants confirmed
Area mapping	Headcount management team do detailed scoping of areas to be counted prior to training
Training delivery	Trainer(s) deliver two day headcount training including site visits and trial counts
Team selection	Participants split into groups, team leader and counting area assigned
Agreement of counting categories	Headcount management team provides list following scoping, confirmed by training participants
<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>	<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>
Observation	Teams visit assigned sites
Data collection	Team members note down their assigned category for counting, team leader transfer to electronic format
Group interactions, discussion and consultation	Teams discuss numbers during and after counting, refine strategy for next count
Risk management	Continuous risk assessment by team leader
<b>DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>
Data analysis	Team leaders report to headcount managers who provides initial analysis. Further analysis by StreetInvest and/or statistics agency
Report	Report by StreetInvest and/or statistics agency
Dissemination	Report published through StreetInvest Global Alliance, local and national government and statistics agency
<b>INDICATIVE BUDGET TO COUNT 8 SITES IN MAJOR CITY</b>	
8 teams of 6 counters required. 2 trainers/ supervisors required	
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>USD</b>
Trainers and supervisors for scoping, training, supervision and analysis*	5600
Training Lunch & Refreshments for 48 participants and 2 trainers - USD 5 per day	500
Training Venue	200
Per diems for 48 participants for 6 days - USD 5 per day	1440
Materials	200
Communications	200
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8140</b>
* Additional travel costs may be incurred	

*This paper was written by Hugo Rukavina and Kate Bretherton, October 2018 and updated in 2019. © StreetInvest 2019*

For further information, see [www.streetinvest.org/headcounting](http://www.streetinvest.org/headcounting)