

Head counting: quantitative data collection on street children

“How many street children are there in country x or city z?” is perhaps the most frequently asked question of any agency for street children or street worker. “Don’t know but I’ll have an educated guess”, is a fairly standard reply. The worst reply is from agencies that guess in big numbers and solemnly declare that there are ‘millions’ of street children. Interestingly both types of answers are unhelpful; both to the street worker and the child. We must know what sort of numbers we are dealing with in any given city or town we are working in. The technique described is therefore an attempt to get closer to realistic figures.

Why

Effective head counting, using a methodology that is reflective and uses the skills of street workers, familiar with the environment of the street child, can result in clearer identification of the number of children living and working on the streets as well as start to understand trends of their movements and activities within a city/town. It can inform more targeted programme interventions to address children’s realities and needs. Head counting is not an exact science nor is it a statistical exercise. But it is a serious piece of observation used as a tool of social research and measurement.

How

Head counting is an exercise relying on observation and is a wholly participatory process from agreeing definitions, to conducting the head counting and peer reviewing to ensure consistency and triangulation of the data. It is therefore much more than a census that only provides a snapshot of the demographics that could be highly inaccurate. StreetInvest promotes a methodology devised by Patrick Shanahan in Accra, Ghana, in the 1990s. The methodology was used in Eastern Congo in 2008 and has recently been used in Addis Ababa and Adama and further headcounts are planned in 10 major urban centres in Ethiopia in a UNICEF funded project. Headcounts using this methodology are also currently being conducted in multiple locations in Sierra Leone.

Starting point: Those involved in the head counting process agree and adopt a description of Street Children to work with to ensure consistency, for example “Any child whose life is controlled by the street is a Street Child”. For the purpose of the head counting exercise the assembled workers agree the age range, which could be adopting the UNCRS definition of 0-18. Alternatively they could adopt a range of 0-22 to take into account that children and young people on the street often have very unclear ideas of their own age, (lack ID to verify their true ages), and often give misleading physical representations of their true age due to malnutrition and the effects of street living. This is also a further reflection that a description rather than a definition of Street Children and their age is often a more flexible approach to understanding the realities for this group of children, adolescents and young people. It isn’t their age that defines them it is their experiences on the street.

Teams of social workers, or those workers who have worked with street children and who understand their lives, count children in key areas of the city where street children are located. They are provided with a week of training before the actual counting activity is initiated. Each team counts every day for a period of five days, including four day time counts and one night time count. They then change with other workers and begin the process over again to ensure triangulation, again conducting 4 day time counts and one night time count. At the end of each week the teams meet to discuss the data collected from the street and this peer review process is a crucial point of the methodology used. The description of the street children agreed is at the core of all the weekly meetings of the street workers. A third and final count is conducted in the same locations and it is the data collected in the last week that is considered the most accurate and the truest figures one can gain from this process.

For a report on the headcounts conducted in Addis Ababa and Adama, Ethiopia 2010/11, click [here](#)