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CITIZEN'S NETWORK  
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## Serbia Chronicle 1 – Street Involved Children

by SeConS

Belgrade, April 2013

In the last couple of weeks, a widespread debate and conflict between civil society and city authorities regarding the possible closure of the Drop-in center for street involved children in Belgrade, has raised considerable attention to the human security hazards that these vulnerable children are exposed to.<sup>1</sup> As a group, street involved children have to a large extent been 'hidden' from the public eye as well as the main spheres of political, economic and social life in Serbia. Thus, the question needs to be raised: Who are street involved children in Serbia, what types of human security risks are they exposed to, and how are these risks manifested?

- Sometimes, when there is no firewood and when it's really cold, and no one is at home, I take some stuff that I don't need and I burn that...

- Once, a guy called me up to his car to give me money, but then he sprayed pepper spray in my eyes...

- The worst was when the street life started, when I got out of the home (home for children without parental care) ... Then life was difficult, life was dark.

Quotes from street involved children<sup>2</sup>

Street involved children (below the age of 18), that is, children who live and/or work on the street, is one of the most vulnerable groups in Serbia. There are four main categories within this group: (1) children who live on the street alone and sleep in abandoned houses, sheds and parks due to lack of other form of shelter; (2) children who live and work on the street with their families; (3) children who work on the street by washing window shields on intersections, look for food in containers, help people with parking, collect and/or sell secondary resources etc. but still go home to their families at night; (4) and lastly, children who live in some form of institution (ex. home for children without parental care) but spend most of their time on the street with their peers. This way of life carries numerous social and health risks which can have devastating effects on the children's lives.

Despite these known threats, research and data on these threats is scarce. For instance, there is no official national estimation on the size of the group. According to some police report there are only about 400 children who live on the street in Serbia while organizations targeting this group higher estimation.<sup>3</sup> The CYI claims that there are a couple of thousand street involved children in Belgrade alone, while unofficial estimates suggest that about 300 children live and work on the street in Novi Sad. Still, considering that 12.2% children in Serbia were classified as poor in 2010 and that over 400.000 children in Serbia received child allowance in 2012, it can be assumed that the number of children living and/or working on the street is large.<sup>4</sup> Children, who are the most vulnerable to social exclusion and poverty, and therefore presuming also

<sup>1</sup> The Drop-in center for street involved children was founded in 2007 and managed by the Center for Youth Integration (CYI) in Belgrade. Since its foundation, over 600 children have been beneficiaries of the center. Until March, the center was financed through donations and city project funds, however, this form of financing is according to CYI unsustainable. The CYI requested that city authorities recognized the center as a social protection service with appropriate system support from the city budget. As the request was not granted, the CYI announced that the Drop-in center would close as off the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes from the following studies: (1) Lukisic-Orlandic, T. (ed.) (2011), *Dečije prošjačenje u Republici Srbiji [Child begging in the Republic of Serbia]*, Save the Children. (2) Roncevic, N. and Antonic, D.B. (eds.) (2011), *Deca koje žive i/ili rade na ulici u Novom Sadu [Children who live and/or work on the street in Novi Sad]*, Humanitarian Association "Ekumenska". (3) Babovic, M. and Suboticki, I. (2013), *Rodni aspekti zdravstvenih i socijalnih rizika partnerki IKD (Gender aspects of health and social risks of female partners of IDUs)*, SeConS, UNDP.

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Serbia: *National Strategy for Youth*, pp. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2010.



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street involvement, are Roma children, children with disabilities, children deprived of parental care, and children who are victims of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence.<sup>5</sup>

Since no nationally representative research has been conducted with this group, a majority of existing data stems from small scale researches conducted by NGOs and some academics, as well as accounts of organizations working directly with this target group. Data from these accounts do however give valuable insights into human security threats this vulnerable group is exposed to and some of the main obstacles they are faced with.



**Poverty and low living standard** – Most street involved children live below the poverty line, often part of a cycle of poverty that is generationally passed on. Not surprisingly, the majority of families with street involved children are jobless. In Novi Sad, among surveyed parents of street involved children, only 3% of fathers were formally employed, while most parents are either without any form of employment or engaged in informal economy, particularly as collectors of secondary resources.<sup>6</sup> This unfavorable economic situation creates numerous threats to children's well-being: inadequate housing and nutrition, exposure to diseases and illnesses, child labor, difficulty to acquire education etc.

**Exclusion from education** – Life and work on the street is barrier towards obtaining a degree from primary, and even less so, from secondary school. Although children are often registered in school, school attendance is irregular and many leave school before completion of the primary school. This trend is also visible in statistics that show that children who live below the poverty line and Roma children are to a significantly lower degree participating in primary and secondary education than the general population.<sup>7</sup> This again creates barriers for future employment and inclusion in the labor market.



**Poor nutrition and health** – Due to the adverse circumstances of working on the street (freezing temperatures, traffic accidents, involvement in sex work, exposure to violence), lack of suitable housing (with water, electricity and sewage), lack of nutritious food (children often eat food found in containers and do not intake adequate calories and nutrients), and other hardships of life on the street (violence, substance abuse including glue and heroin), children are often faced with health problems such as lice and itch, tooth pain, difficulties with learning, malnutrition, diarrhea, physical injuries, infectious and sexually transmittable diseases, as well as numerous psychological problems.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Milanovic, J. (2006). *State of children in Serbia in 2006*, UNICEF. Available online: [http://www.unicef.org/serbia/State\\_of\\_Children\\_in\\_Serbia\\_2006\\_1-56\(1\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/serbia/State_of_Children_in_Serbia_2006_1-56(1).pdf) (02.04.2013).

<sup>6</sup> Roncevic, N. and Antonic, D.B. (eds.) (2011), *Deca koje žive i/ili rade na ulici u Novom Sadu* [Children who live and/or work on the street in Novi Sad], Humanitarian Association "Ekumenska".

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF (2012), *Multiplier Indicator Cluster Survey, Key Highlight*. Available online: [http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/MICS4\\_Key\\_Highlights.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/MICS4_Key_Highlights.pdf) (02.04.2013).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

### Child begging on the street in Serbia

A recent research on children who are involved in begging on the streets in Serbia shows that, apart from begging being a criminal offence itself, some of the main threats of this type of work are on the life and physical health of children. Furthermore, the research shows that children who beg on the streets are also often involved in sex work, use of psychoactive substances, and different forms of criminal activity.

Lukisic-Orlandic, T. (ed.) (2011), *Dečije prošjačenje u Republici Srbiji* [Child begging in the Republic of Serbia], Save the Children.

**Lack of civil legal status** – Not only do street involved children lack basic identification papers and proof of citizenship, but they are often not even in the birth register. As such, they are 'legally invisible' and therefore have additional obstacles in realizing their human rights - access to health care, social security, education etc.<sup>9</sup>



**Exposure to violence** – Physical, sexual, economic and psychological violence is another factor that threatens the security of street involved children. These forms of violence are evident both within the family as well as broader environment. According to the CYI, boys who are beneficiaries of the Drop-in center in Belgrade are often victims of labor exploitation, forced begging and coerced into criminal activities, while girls are usually victims of sexual exploitation and forced marriages.<sup>10</sup> Results from a survey conducted at the Drop-in center in Novi Sad shows that an alarming 93% of children been victims of violence while working on the street (27.2% were victims of direct physical violence).<sup>11</sup>

### Increased risk of sex work and injecting drug use as a consequence of street involvement

A research among female partners of injecting drug users (IDUs) also shows that girls who are involved in street life at an early age are often forced into sex work, human trafficking and drug use by (older) male figures.

Babovic, M. and Suboticki, I. (2013), *Rodni aspekti zdravstvenih i socijalnih rizika partnerki IKD* (Gender aspects of health and social risks of female partners of IDUs), SeConS, UNDP

**Discrimination** – Street involved children are victims of widespread discrimination by people in the community as well as by institutions. This discrimination, which is most often expressed through some form of psychological violence, causes stress and fear among children. Even more alarmingly, at an early age children lose trust in people in their surroundings and representatives from institutions, that is, people and institutions that should be providers of support.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Djordjevic, M., Bircanin, F. and Vasiljic, M. (2011), *Mi znamo najbolje "Terenski rad Centra za integraciju mladih"* [We know best "Field work of the Center for Youth integration"], CYI.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Roncevic, N. and Antonic, D.B. (eds.) (2011),

<sup>12</sup> Djordjevic, M., Bircanin, F. and Vasiljic, M. (2011)

The above represented aspects of the human security hazards street involved children are exposed to, are just some of conditions which generate a life of continued risk and social exclusion. It is also important to emphasize that all the factors that lead to increased insecurity are not autonomous, but rather mutually reinforcing.

To return to the beginning, as the news of a possible closure of the Drop-in center for street involved children in Belgrade was announced, the continuous hardships and insecurities this groups is facing on a daily bases started to come to light.

“To all the children in Belgrade who live without a roof over their head, the only place where they can take a bath, eat, and spend the night might close its doors from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April...” – Blic (26.03.2013).

“Without a Drop-in center for street involved children in Belgrade, Serbia will, as they say, show unwillingness or inability to protect one of the most vulnerable category of children.” – B92 (28.03.2013)

“Give the children from the street their Drop-in center back!” – Kurir (01.04.2013)

- My name is Jovana and I am 14 years old. I've been coming to the Drop-in for about 3 years. Whenever I was left on the street I could come here to sleep for a day or two... I feel good here, I have food and they give us some clothes and shoes, but if they close I really don't know where we'll be going. I'll have to go back to the streets and beg, what can I do... My life is horrible, it's not good. – *Jovana told Free Europe*

News of this possible threat, mobilized broad support among the public and civil society organization. Press releases, letters to the Secretariat for Social Protection and Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, a Facebook campaign, collection of signatures of support, and eventually a public protest on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April before the Secretariat for Social Protection, all contributed to the news that CYI and the Secretariat had found a solution and that the Drop-in will remain open.

The Drop-in – we are also part of the city

