

Kampala: A city safe for children?

**An investigation into the physical threats to children in
their homes, schools and communities**



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Placement Report for Kids Club Kampala

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i. Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a 6-week research placement in Kampala, Uganda in June and July 2018. It investigates the everyday threats to children's physical wellbeing in the three main locations they live their lives – their homes, schools and communities. This research conducted interviews with 59 participants, including 40 children and 19 adults. With children, this study used creative methods to supplement their answers. It found that participants perceive the home and the school as relatively equal in terms of threat to children, and this depended largely on experience and the quality of this institution. The community was considered the most dangerous by all participants, particularly due to the threat of strangers, and children were most vulnerable when making the journey between home and school. During the research process, kidnappings for ransom and political assassinations were high on the agenda. This may have influenced participant's feelings of risk to children in their communities.

1. Introduction

This placement report is the culmination of six weeks research placement in Kampala, Uganda from 9th June until 19th July 2018. It investigates the physical safety of children in their homes, schools and communities. It explores the roles that families, educational institutions and neighbourhoods play in both harming and safeguarding children. Most of this research took place in two slum communities, Katanga and Namuwongo, and different schools in Kampala. It includes the perspectives of 19 adults and 40 children, whose ideas and opinions are drawn out through interviews and creative, picture-drawing methods. It found that the home and school were relatively equal in terms of feelings of fear and risk for children, although the school was the most common 'safe space'. These responses varied depending on the respondent or their child's experiences of violence, neglect or love, and the quality of the institution. All participants regarded the public sphere as the most dangerous for children, particularly when children were making the journey to school. Kidnappers, thieves, criminals and murderers were all highlighted by both children and adults as significant risks to children. This may have been influenced by the recent media coverage of kidnappings and assassinations in the city.

This report is intended for the employees at Kids Club Kampala, both in the UK and Uganda, and individuals and organisations working in the field of child protection in Kampala.

2. Kids Club Kampala

Kids Club Kampala (KCK) are an organisation working to bring hope and love to vulnerable children. They do this through educational and vocational training, sports, games and feeding programmes. KCK aim to empower impoverished communities and families through emotional and material support, and community development projects.

3. The Issue

Uganda has one of the youngest populations in the world - almost 50% are under 15 years old (World Population Review, 2018). This makes addressing issues concerning child protection and development is crucial to the socio-economic development of the country.

Sub-Saharan Africa has extremely high rates of violence against children (VAC). Research has shown that 40% of children in Uganda have suffered from physical violence (Child et al., 2014). Much of this happens in homes and schools. A social tolerance of VAC, combined with a lack of awareness regarding the physical and psychological harm it can cause or alternative methods of discipline, contribute to the widespread use of corporal punishment (Pankhurst, Negussie & Mulugeta, 2016). Ugandan children also suffer from neglect, abuse and exploitation in the form of child labour, early marriage and trafficking. These crimes against children are chronically under-reported. Reasons include a lack of faith in the police and because of the prevalence of these crimes within private circles where the perpetrators are known or even trusted to the children.

Poverty is a major underlying cause and structural driver of threats to children's safety. Economic and food insecurity increase the likelihood of children entering into marriage before the age of 18, as almost 47% of Ugandan girls do (Unicef, 2015). The hidden costs of Uganda's 'free primary education' means many children are out of school, on the streets and acutely vulnerable to risks including exploitation, crime and abuse (Better Care Network, 2017). Poor financial situations at home also cause children to drop out of school to find work to support the family. Poverty can also lead to harmful behaviours such as alcohol or drug abuse, activities which contribute to domestic violence and the neglect of children. Finally, poverty also strains the services in place to protect children such as schools, social services and the police.

A number of policies are in place in Uganda to protect children. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the national Children's Act. In practice, child protection involves a diverse range of actors including the government, social services, community members and families. This research has focused on the role of the home, the school and the community. Families are the first to nurture their children's cognitive development, teaching them how to stay safe and avoid risks. However, children can be at major risk from their own families. Research has shown that despite common fears of the threats from strangers, most violence and physical harm against children happens in the private sphere of the home (Pineiro, 2006). Violence from family members is the first form of violence an individual will face in their life and it shapes attitudes and behaviours into adulthood. Schools are essential to developing children's cognitive skills which enable them to protect themselves. It keeps children off the streets, in a predictable and positive environment that fosters their healthy development. Teachers play a vital role for children who experience danger and threat everyday in their lives at home. These positive relationships can ensure children are supported, boost their self-esteem and provide an important buffer for children in challenging circumstances like those in Kampala (Wright, 2013). Finally, a positive community environment can enable a child's development and protect them when schools and families fail. However, a dangerous community can overcome even the best-intentioned families and teachers. Research has shown that strangers are perceived to be the biggest threat to children, often because this is the most common teaching in child safety education.

4. Research Methods

The aim of this research was to gain a broad perspective of the threats to children's physical safety in their everyday lives. It focuses on three main locations – the home, the school and the community. Public discourse suggests the home is the appropriate place for a child while the public is considered risky and dangerous. This research investigated these conceptualisations of risk in the context of Kampala.

Over a 6-week period this research conducted 29 interviews with 59 participants - 19 adults and 40 children. Participants included KCK staff and social workers, NGO workers, school teachers, local leaders, parents, young adults, a police officer and a Senior Probation and Welfare Officer from the Ugandan Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. All

these participants play an important role in the development and protection of children. They were recruited from the different slum communities or schools visited, with the assistance of the KCK staff. As well as interviews, creative drawing methods were used with children from the ages of 5 – 17. They were asked to draw two pictures, one which showed the people and place they considered 'safe', and one that they considered 'unsafe'. These images were then discussed with the child to prevent an adult interpretation and ensure the content was understood. This was a useful method for working with children, as drawing allows them to reflect on their ideas and engage with the topic in a creative way.

Children were included as participants because research has demonstrated that even young children can contribute useful ideas. They were important to include in this research because they are the ones largely at risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation in Kampala. This research received ethics approval from the University of Sheffield's Geography department. Consent to participate was gained from everyone, including the children and their gatekeepers. As the researcher, I underwent an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check before interacting with any children and at least one KCK employee was present during every interview. Translation was required in some interviews. If any child disclosed any information that was troubling they were encouraged to speak to a KCK social worker.

This research attempted to vary children from different economic backgrounds. However, due to the nature of KCK's work with vulnerable children, it is a predominantly pro-poor sample which fails to include the perspectives of wealthier children. By focusing on the home, the school and the community, this research excludes children in the workplace and in institutions. It does not attempt to be representative of children in Kampala, instead to provide a good insight.

5. Key Findings

The following section presents and discusses the threats-to and safety-of children in the home, the school and the community.

A) The Home

This research found that the home and family played an important role in safeguarding children. Participants did not emphasise the protective capabilities of families, but how children without families have little means of survival. Children in these circumstances were considered acutely vulnerable to violence, crime and exploitation. Child participants generally

considered home to be a safe place, depending on their experiences. The main way children found their families and homes to keep them safe was through their parents and relatives counselling them and by being there to protect them from bad people.

However, families were found to be key perpetrators in harming children. Neglect was considered a significant problem, particularly in the slums. Alcohol and drug abuse perceived to be a main cause, especially as it takes funding away from school fees, clothing and food. The prominence of women-headed households was also considered to be a main factor in the neglect of children. Many of the women in the slums were abandoned by their husbands, and many are very young and unable to provide for their own children. These single mothers are most neglectful of their children's wellbeing, according to some participants. Young girls are considered at the greatest risk because they are more likely to be married off in exchange for a dowry. These neglected girls who marry young and get pregnant without the means to provide for that child, continue the cycle of neglected children. Finally, the biggest source of neglect spoken of by children was the absence of their parents. This is what makes children feel most scared and unsafe in the home. The absence of parents means dangerous people can enter their homes – relating to their fears about strangers in the community.

Violence in the home is considered a universal human rights challenge. Corporal punishment in the home is common but accepted in Kampala, according to a KCK employee. Research suggests mistreatment and violence in the home is the most common cause of street children moving away from their homes. Violence comes from parents, siblings, family members and step-parents. Participants claimed that children from rural families who have come to live with relatives in Kampala often complain of violence from them. Alcohol and drug abuse were considered a key factor contributing to domestic violence and VAC.

B) The School

This research found the school to play a huge role in the protection of children. The term 'school' refers to private and government schools, and to the KCK educational centres. All children appreciated the feeling of safety that came from gatekeepers and security guards at these institutions, comparing this to the precarious safety of their homes when their parents were absent. Children in boarding and private schools all claimed to feel safest at school,

suggesting the importance of investing in these institutions in Kampala. Children without these facilities expressed a desire to have gates, walls, security cameras, guards, and uniforms to identify them.

Keeping children busy and off the streets was considered one of the most important aspects of being in school. This was emphasised by KCK workers, parents, teachers, the police officer and the government minister. All teachers were passionate about keeping children in schools because of the negative situations at home. One was particularly concerned about the vulnerability of female children if they were not in school, because otherwise they were at risk of exploitation, early marriage and pregnancy.

Teachers were found to be critical, and perhaps the most important factor, in the protection of children. Children frequently chose their school as the place they felt safest because their teachers were there to look after them. This research found that teachers were vigilant in looking for signs of harm or abuse in their students, both physical and emotional. The KCK social workers have a procedure in place for intervening when they notice these signs. This is extremely valuable in ensuring the protection of children. In the classrooms, teachers educate children on their human rights, how to be safe and what risks to avoid. Gaining an education was also considered to be important in safeguarding children by giving them the prospect of a future without poverty.

However, some participants indicated that children were reluctant or afraid to talk to their teachers for fear of further abuse by the perpetrator. With classes as overcrowded as they are in Kampala, teachers can sometimes miss cases of abuse or neglect of some children. This was a reason a few children gave as to why their school was not their safest place. These overcrowded classrooms also put children at greater risk of peer violence. Informal observations made at the KCK education centres showed that low-level peer violence was extremely common. This violence can negatively affect children's cognitive development, and more should be done to address it.

Finally, corporal punishment was considered by most participants to be on-going in Uganda, despite the 2006 ban. An NGO worker recounted an experience witnessing a child caned in

front of a school assembly and a KCK worker explained how a child at Ewafe had previously been beaten at school until he fainted. A social acceptance of violence as a method of discipline is reinforced by teachers. Wrong answers, incomplete homework and poor grades are often physically punished. The Ugandan Children Act has stated that teachers now lose their license if caught physically punishing children. Despite this, physical forms of discipline are socially ingrained and traditional. Many adult participants argued that they were brought up that way, and so felt it fair for violence to be used against the younger generations. There was little awareness that physical punishment sends a message of aggression to children which they internalise. This increases the likelihood of those children being aggressive and violent in their adult lives. Corporal punishment also negatively effects children's self-esteem and their educational development. This has terrible consequences if these children also come from dangerous and unstable lives at home.

C) The Community

The public sphere of children's lives was considered the most dangerous by all participants. Kidnappers were considered a significant threat to children due to the prominence of this issue in the media during the months of this research. 'Strangers' were highlighted by children as the greatest risk. It was strangers that children were taught to be wary of and avoid, by parents and in schools. Drunks and smokers in the slums are also considered dangerous because they were out of their right minds and capable of hurting children if they found them. Children drew bars and drunk people regularly in their 'unsafe' pictures. The journey between home and school was the time when children were considered most vulnerable to strangers.

Participants in this research put considerable faith in the police, despite recent charges of corruption at the highest level. Children frequently drew police stations and police officers in their 'safe' pictures, describing them as protection from dangerous strangers like kidnappers, criminals and drunks. Most considered the police to be doing a good. The child protection helpline has been making substantial improvements to the reporting of crimes against children. It has also improved the co-ordination of agencies involved with the protection of children.

However, some participants considered the threat that police themselves pose to children in Kampala, particularly street children. During one interview there was an incident where a police officer caned a child, although the charges were not clear. Other participants claimed that due to corruption, many cases of crimes against children were dropped because the perpetrator had money to bribe the police. The police officer interviewed in this research emphasised how they need greater facilitation, manpower and resources to effectively monitor crimes against children.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this report has presented the findings of the research into the threats to children's physical wellbeing in the home, the school and the community. It found that the community and strangers within it, are considered the greatest threat to children. The school was usually children's safest place due to good security and teachers, although the home was a close second.

7. Recommendations

- Violence and crime against children are chronically under-reported. This means teachers and parents must play an increased role in supporting the ability of children to report crimes against them.
- Schools are uniquely placed to communicate with parents and communities, they should reach out and educate them on methods of intra-family conflict resolution and child development to help break the cycle of violence.
- Schools must not let classes begin or end during the hours of darkness, so children do not have to travel to or from school in the dark as this significantly increases their risk.
- Stewards should be positioned on the main school routes.
- Schools and communities should endeavour to provide school transport or organise groups of children who live near each other to walk in groups of 5+.
- Continue to develop and encourage the use of the child protection helpline.

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