



## Growing Up in Crisis: How Sudan's Conflict is driving Streetism and Homelessness among Children

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*Street, homeless, street connected, of the street, street involved, street working, from street families, or in street situation, etc.*..all are terms applied in a way or another to children who are dependently connected to streets, whether for permanent or temporal living; all share the fact of staying for long durations away from families and un-supervised by responsible careers. <sup>(1)</sup> These phenomena can be described as streetism, which will be referred to frequently in this paper.

Streetism refers to a situation where children are strongly and frequently linked with streets for living and/or working without access to basic needs, including education and parental supervision. It commonly indicates a weak family bond (some live on the street and go back to their families at night), inadequate child protection mechanisms, caused by several unequal socioeconomic predictors, including poverty, family breakdown, displacement, weak holistic national social protection systems, etc. <sup>(2,3)</sup>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69993/2025.3.3.en2>

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Two major issues that impede focused interventions to prevent and control streetism worldwide are the wide scope of defining “street/homeless children” and availability of accurate data on the numbers of this group of children. Definitions and estimates are crucial for sound planning for each category, as they have different characteristics and so require different contextualized interventions. <sup>(1)</sup> Sudan is not different, where estimates of children suffering streetism are scarce and vary significantly from an earlier count of 70,000 in 2008, <sup>(4)</sup> to 600,000 in March 2025. <sup>(5)</sup> The latter higher rates can be attributed to the long history of recurrent conflicts and displacement.

Besides being scarce, studies of homeless children in Sudan are limited to Khartoum state. Studies show that more than two-thirds of children are from states other than Khartoum (the majority had conflict crises) and almost a quarter or more are from neighboring countries, namely Chad, Ethiopia and South Sudan. <sup>(6,7)</sup> Despite over one-third of children being illiterate, about half received a basic education, which could facilitate their reintegration, perhaps in technical education. Close to two-thirds left home because of poverty and family issues like divorce, violence, neglect, death of either of parents or both, displacement, etc; however, one third return home and some are

accompanied by families on the streets. <sup>(6,7)</sup> Children on the street are commonly engaged in begging, violence and abuse, consumption of substances, namely glue-sniffing, tobacco use, street gangs and other offending practices. <sup>(7)</sup> Like other countries, streetism in Sudan is amplified by the chronic economic deterioration, leading to poverty and social inequity and the recurrent conflicts in different parts of the country, the latest of which is the worst of them. More than five million children in Sudan were estimated to have fled their homes, searching for safety, and hundreds lost the company of families during the war chaos, abandoned in a place to call home. <sup>(8)</sup> Save the Children International estimates that 7,600 children are fleeing homes daily as a result of the war. <sup>(9)</sup> Schools that were a place of learning and joy are now shelters for the larger displaced communities. As a result, more than 17 million of the 19 million school-aged children are out of school. <sup>(8)</sup>

During this conflict, children suffered grave violations, including killings, sexual violence, and forced recruitment into armed groups. <sup>(10)</sup> Family breakdown, migration, and displacement are all interconnected drivers, being a cause and a consequence of large-scale child homelessness.

Sudan's economy and poverty landscape, as predictors of streetism, were high before the 2023 conflict. National poverty rates (61.1%) ranged between 48.8% in urban settings

compared to 67.6% in rural areas. The devastating economic crisis arising from several factors and extensively triggered by the war has led to a 48% contraction of the GDP in 2023, which is expected to have pushed over 1.8 million people into poverty if the war continued to 2025. <sup>(11)</sup> The economic crisis, by amplifying poverty, injustice, unemployment, and inequalities, is one of the key factors pushing children and young adolescents to the streets. Family factors, whether underpinned by poverty or social breakdowns, equally result in streetism, especially in view of the rapid transformations in cultural values, discriminatory beliefs and general societal attitudes towards children. <sup>(12)</sup> Many homeless and displaced children engage in informal work or street labour out of necessity, sacrificing their education and health to support themselves or their families. This cycle both perpetuates and deepens their vulnerability. <sup>(6,12)</sup>

Including children and adolescents, Sudanese faced violent attacks, inadequate access to food and healthcare, leading to hunger, undernutrition, and ill-health, impacting their mental health and safety, with children being particularly affected. As a result, an estimated 15.7 million children and their families affected by the crisis in Sudan are at risk of mental health disorders, caused by the combined challenges of hunger and conflict. <sup>(10,13)</sup>

In Ethiopia, a study assessed the nutritional status of children and adolescents aged 12-19 years, found that 44% and 56% of them were respectively thin and stunted. Length of stay on the street, being sick during the last three months, using unimproved sources of water and drinking alcohol were claimed as predictors of undernutrition. <sup>(14)</sup>

Undernutrition is highly prevalent among homeless children, posing grave threats to their physical and cognitive development, requiring urgent nutritional and health outreach interventions. In Sudan, a significantly high proportion (80%) of street children were food insecure, with a higher percentage of moderate and severe food insecurity as revealed in a study in Khartoum, 2025. <sup>(6)</sup>

Mental health disorders are among the grave consequences of wars and insecurity. Research reveals that trauma resulting from disasters, coupled with frequent and different kinds of losses and subsequent helplessness, is perceived to be the root cause of homelessness. <sup>(15)</sup> Similarly, poverty heightens the risk of developing mental illnesses as a result of the physical and psychosocial impact of lower socioeconomic status, leading to greater disease burden and the lack of access to healthcare. People with poor mental health are more susceptible to key factors such as loss of productivity, disaffiliation, social stigmata and negative stereotyping, exacerbating

deprivation that can lead to more impoverishment and homelessness. <sup>(15)</sup>

In view of the above, comprehensive and coordinated responses, a spanning policy reform, protection services, community-based interventions, and restoration of basic health and educational support are needed to address both immediate and structural factors underlying the problem of streetism in all its forms. Research shows that despite the great challenges; yet focused approaches through personal and emotional support, cultural and religious beliefs, supportive peer relationships, and participation in sports activities are protective and resilient strategies that should be strengthened in health promotion interventions with a focus on mental health, the prevention of violence, substance use, and daily physical activities that seem to provide meaning and hope. <sup>(16)</sup>

Interventionists should follow a rights-based approach that involves partnership and active engagement with street children, rather than a charitable one. This approach helps empower children in various forms of streetism to support their well-being and productive participation in their communities. An example is that interventions targeting working street children who are living with or frequently visit their parents are different from interventions for lone street children. <sup>(17)</sup> More efforts shall be exerted to enhance the social protective systems by the government and civil society

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**VOLUME 3, ISSUE 3, SEP – DEC 2025**

**ISSN: 2948-3026**



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