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## "They Shamed Me": An Exploratory Study on the Vulnerabilities of Street-Involved Boys to Sexual Exploitation in Manila, Philippines

Jarrett D. Davis

*up! International*, jarrett.d.davis@gmail.com

Glenn M. Miles

*up! International*, drglennmiles@gmail.com

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# "They Shamed Me": An Exploratory Study on the Vulnerabilities of Street-Involved Boys to Sexual Exploitation in Manila, Philippines

## Abstract

This exploratory study is one of a series of research projects interviewing survivors of sexual exploitation in Southeast Asia. It assesses the risk factors and vulnerabilities of street children in Manila. This research study assesses the risk factors and vulnerabilities of street children in this context. A questionnaire-based survey was administered to participants to gain a holistic view of the lives of 51 street-involved (street-living or street-working) boys from the Manila area. The survey consisted of a series of questions about demographics, family background, prejudice and discrimination, sexual risk factors, substance abuse, sexual violence and abuse, income generation, spirituality, and future plans. The key findings of this survey indicate that most of the participants were experiencing physical, sexual and substance abuse. Furthermore, participants revealed the stigma and discrimination they experience from working on the streets and demonstrate the internal struggle between providing for their families and societal traditions. By truly understanding these effects and the factors leading up to sexual exploitation and their hopes for the future, then their needs can best be met. Direct service providers can use the findings of the study to provide services that are tailored to meet the specific needs of the target vulnerable population and prevent further exploitation.

## Keywords

Philippines, Manila, boys, street, sexual exploitation, sexual violence, abuse, commercial sexual exploitation, pornography, stigma, health, discrimination, violence, shelter, substance abuse, assistance

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**“THEY SHAMED ME”:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE VULNERABILITIES OF  
STREET-INVOLVED BOYS TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN MANILA,  
PHILIPPINES**

**Jarrett D. Davis**

*Up! International*

**Glenn M. Miles**

*Up! International*

**ABSTRACT**

This exploratory study is one of a series of research projects interviewing survivors of sexual exploitation in Southeast Asia. It assesses the risk factors and vulnerabilities of street children in Manila. This research study assesses the risk factors and vulnerabilities of street children in this context. A questionnaire-based survey was administered to participants to gain a holistic view of the lives of 51 street-involved (street-living or street-working) boys from the Manila area. The survey consisted of a series of questions about demographics, family background, prejudice and discrimination, sexual risk factors, substance abuse, sexual violence and abuse, income generation, spirituality, and future plans. The key findings of this survey indicate that most of the participants were experiencing physical, sexual and substance abuse. Furthermore, participants revealed the stigma and discrimination they experience from working on the streets and demonstrate the internal struggle between providing for their families and societal traditions. Only by truly understanding these effects and the factors leading up to sexual exploitation and their hopes for the future, can their needs can best be met. Direct service providers can use the findings of the study to provide services that are tailored to meet the specific needs of the target vulnerable population and prevent further exploitation.

**KEYWORDS**

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**O**VER THE PAST DECADE the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) has gained much-needed attention in the United States and around the globe. However, most of the research and policies surrounding this topic have focused on the experiences of women and girls (Cockbain, Ashby, & Brayley, 2017) and fail to address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of boys and young men (Mitchell et al., 2017). What little attention is afforded to boys often identifies them as exploiters, pimps, and buyers of sex or as active and willing participants in sex work, rather than as victims or survivors of exploitation (ECPAT Philippines, 2008). Because of this general lack of information and awareness,

healthcare systems are often unprepared to handle cases of sexual violence against males (Von Hohendorff, Habigzang, & Koller, 2017). In part, this is due to a lack of disclosure of sexual violence among male victims and, subsequently, a low number of referrals to healthcare and social welfare practitioners. There are unique barriers to male-disclosure of sexual violence, which have been well-documented in research (Donne, DeLuca, Pleskach, Bromson, Mosley, Perez, ... & Frye, 2018; Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli, & Epstein, 2005; Lisak, 1994; Sigurdardottir, Hall-dorsdottir, & Bender, 2012). Von Hohendorff's research defines several critical barriers to male disclosure of sexual violence. These include personal barriers where a victim does not disclose due to intentional avoidance due to shame or concerns related to sexual identity or orientation; interpersonal barriers, where a victim fears of negative repercussions to (or from) personal relationships; and sociocultural/sociopolitical barriers, where a male does not disclose because sexual victimization goes against the expectations of masculinity, because there is a lack of services for males, or because there is little awareness or acceptance of male victimization.

### **The Neglect of Males in International Literature**

Throughout international research on sexual violence, several factors lead to misperceptions about males. Gender stereotypes that assume male perpetrators and female victims, inconsistent definitions for sexual violence, and methodological sampling biases in national surveys, which exclude prison inmate populations, the majority of which are male and have a high prevalence of sexual violence (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). Further, most international research and policy documents lack any serious engagement with male victimization (Touquet & Gorris, 2016) and typically highlight female victimization, reinforcing existing assumptions about male perpetration and female vulnerability (Willis, 2013). As a product of this, discourse on violence often conflates sexual violence with violence against women and girls (International Center for Transitional Justice [ICTJ], 2016) leading to a perception that sexual violence is a women's issue. These assumptions complicate the identification of at-risk boys and the provision of services to meet their needs (Thomas & Speyer, 2016), especially with regard to gay, bisexual, trans, or queer males, are at a notably higher risk for sexual violence, and are also less likely to report or to seek support services (Donne et al., 2017).

In a review of 166 scholarly articles on the global sex industry, 84% exclusively discussed female sex workers and made no mention of males (Dennis, 2008). When articles mentioned males, they were ascribed or presumed to have, significantly more agency than females. When articles addressed female sex workers, they discussed issues of gender-based violence, emotions/family support and a variety of other social vulnerabilities. On the other hand, research commonly views males in the sex industry as liabilities for sexual health, rather than vulnerable human beings that can be sexually, physically or emotionally harmed (Graham, 2007).

The narrative of male invulnerability is often reinforced by discussion within the media, which tend to reinforce a gender-exclusive understanding of vulnerability, highlighting only female victimization, while often obscuring the plight of male victims, including young boys (Jones, 2010). The most common narratives of sexual exploitation and trafficking often explicitly describe instances in which men enslave and sexually abuse "women and girls," dichotomizing males and females as "predator" and "prey," respectively, often blurring the concepts of sexual

exploitation and misogyny. The focus of the discussion on vulnerability, exploitation, and violence then becomes solely on women as the victims of male violence. Thus, the assumption of female vulnerability and male resilience is often foundational in research on males who are exploited, informing the basis of data interpretation and analysis.

Research in South Asia echoes a similar reality (Akula, 2006; Ali & Sarkar, 2006; Mohammed & Zafar, 2006). UNICEF IRC indicates boys have significantly less legal protection from sexual abuse and exploitation and more restricted access to services for victims than girls. In some cases, legislation protects only girls and women and excludes boys and men (UNICEF, 2010). In Sri Lanka, as many as 90% of the estimated 20,000-30,000 sexually exploited children in the country are boys, some of whom can be pre-ordered to be waiting for foreign pedophiles upon their arrival in the country (Frederick, 2010; UNICEF, 2010; Zafft, C.R., & Tidball, S., (2010). Furthermore, research cites that instances of abuse and sexual exploitation against boys in Sri Lanka far outweighs that which is committed against girls, constituting up to 90% of sexual exploitation cases in Sri Lanka (ECPAT, 2008). Many young boys are filmed for child pornography, which can be circulated the world-over. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimates that over 50% of all the child pornography that it seizes depicts boys (UNICEF, 2010).

In many, if not most, societies, the sexual abuse of males has been a complicated reality to acknowledge, much less understand. Much of this may lie within cultural constructions of masculinity, which is often understood as being innately strong, robust, and resilient to victimization. Thus, the concept of vulnerability often stands in stark contrast to the very concept of masculinity itself (Kia-Keating et al., 2005). Even males are not often consciously aware of their vulnerabilities due to this strong cultural narrative, except in the case of unusual circumstances, such as rape within prisons (Graham, 2007). Throughout the literature on sexual violence, it has been typical for a male's experience of sexual abuse during childhood to be described as less traumatic than it would be for a female. Such instances have not always even been identified as abusive, especially if the perpetrator involved is female (Hilton et al., 2008). Despite these cultural narratives, vulnerability studies on the effects of sexual abuse on males continue to echo the contrary. For instance, in a gender analysis on the effects of sexual abuse on women and men, male participants were found to have higher levels of an array of different mental health symptoms compared to their female counterparts (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2004). In a retrospective cohort study conducted among 17,337 adult HMO members in San Diego, found 16% of males and 25% of females to have reported childhood sexual abuse (Dube et al., 2005). This study compared the histories and outcomes of those who had experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA) with those who had not experienced CSA and demonstrated that the effects on the risks of multiple behavioral, mental, and social outcomes between males and females were nearly identical. These findings are supported by an earlier study of 26 autobiographical interviews with male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, of which 92.3% of cases involved multiple instances of abuse (Lisak, 1994).

### **Street-Involvement and Commercial Sexual Exploitation**

Despite the majority of street-involved children, globally, being from low and middle-income countries such as those in the Southeast Asia region, the overwhelming majority of research on street-involved children and youth have been conducted in high-income nations, such as the USA, the United Kingdom (UK),

and various European cities (Woan, Lin, & Auerswald, 2013). Social and economic factors lead to an increased incidence of street-involvement among children in some families. Older children carry a social obligation through the tradition of filial piety to contribute to their families' earnings. Among families living in poverty, child street-involvement can be commonplace and even socially expected within families. The family responsibility and the duty of caring for parents, younger siblings and even extended family members is shared within the family and can lead to street work or unsafe migration in search of economic opportunities to meet their family's needs (Beazley, 2003).

Street-connected youth are also at high-risk to be exploited and trafficked, including trafficking for forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation and being forced to beg, work or engage in criminal activity Thomas de Benítez (2007). Additionally, being of young age and isolation lead them to be easy prey for all kinds of influence, manipulation, and abuse, whether by relatives, strangers from their villages of provenance or by street gang members. Sex is an important aspect of the experiences of street-involved boys with many engaging in survival sex, commercial sex, comfort sex, casual sex and romantic relationships with multiple partners from both within and outside the street world (Beazley, 2003). Street children are commonly exposed to risks of violence from older street children, and such violence can become their norm (Nada & El Daw, 2010). A study exploring the experiences of street-involved boys (8-18 years old) in Sihanoukville, Cambodia found 38% of street-involved instances of sexual touching from adults and 26% disclosed forms of abuse that went beyond just touching, often citing forced and coercive sex, and being offered food, money, or gifts in exchange for providing sexual services to adults (Davis & Miles, 2014). These rates were significantly higher than the global average of 17% and five times higher than a 2014 UNICEF study, which reports that only 5% of boys in Cambodia experienced sexual abuse between the ages of 13 and 18 years (UNICEF, 2014).

### **Street-Involved Children in Manila**

The city of Manila has become notorious for the prevalence of street-involved children. Despite this reality, research into their needs and vulnerabilities is sparse, and statistical information on prevalence and vulnerability is often outdated. One study estimated the population of street-involved children in the Philippines to be 3% of the total population of children aged 0-17 years of age in the Philippines (Lamberte, 2002). Of these, about 20% were 'highly visible' on the streets. The study finds Metro-Manila to have 11,346 "highly visible" street-children, which is the highest in the country. Breaking this down by area, the city of Manila had the highest figured population of highly visible street-working children.

While a significant majority (70%) of street-involved children in Lamberte's study were found to be male, literature available in the Philippines commonly ignores male vulnerability and underscores only the vulnerabilities of females, calling for increased social support for women and girls. At times, evidence refutes the assumptions of male resilience and female vulnerability. Teresita Silva, in a 2002 country report, cites that even though a minority of total street children (30%) are girls, their 'gender and situation' make them more vulnerable than boys who are "better able to protect themselves" (Silva, 2002, p 3). While these are substantial assumptions, the author gives no further data or references to support her claims for male resilience apart from mere anecdotal speculation.

While the Philippine Government cites conducting numerous training for law enforcement and new legislation aimed at the protection of women and children, as well as numerous institutional reforms and new programs to prevent violence against women and children, boys and young men are commonly denied the structural and legislative protections that are readily afforded to women and girls. A bill currently proposed by the Duterte Administration (House Bill 922) aims to lower the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 15 to nine years of age. The bill purports to prevent crime syndicates using “minors as implements and shields to perpetrate crimes” (Republic Act 9344, H.B 922, 16th Cong., 2013: 1). The current death toll in Duterte's drug war has reached into the thousands, including at least 29 children who were either shot by unidentified gunmen or ‘accidentally’ killed during police raids from July to November 2016, according to the Children’s Legal Rights and Development Centre (CLRDC) and the Network Against Killings in the Philippines, both advocacy groups. If the Philippine government enacts this law, boys may end up in a notably more precarious situation than girls.

In recent years, the city of Manila has received an increasing amount of criticism for its undertaking of rescue operations targeted at street-involved children. Initially, these operations were created in response to the high prevalence of street-involved children. However, recent submissions to the UN High Council on Human Rights by the Asian Legal Resource Centre have cited significant and systemic issues of torture and violence against children under these programs (Asian Legal Resource Centre, 2014). A central part of this submission involves the Reception and Action Centre (RAC) in Manila, which is a “custodial and rehabilitation center,” where children in conflict with the law, street children and orphans are detained. These ‘rescue’ operations are often indiscriminate, failing to make a distinction between children in conflict with the law and children in need of special care or protection and fail to consider the individual needs and circumstances of the children involved. It is further claimed that children experience severe violations to their fundamental human rights during detainment, including issues of overcrowding, lack of caretakers, and abuse by both caretakers and other children (Bahay Tuluyan, 2009).

Street-involved children are uniquely vulnerable to various kinds of violence and exploitation, particularly CSEC. The Philippine Government has adopted two broad classifications for street children: children ‘on’ the street and children ‘of’ the street (Lalor, 1999; Silva, 2002). The former refers to children who live at home but spend significant amounts of time on the streets engaged in income-generating activities, while the latter refers to children who solely survive on the streets with little or no contact with their families (Merrill, Njord, Njord, Read, & Pachano., 2010. p143).

Poverty is cited to be the main factor contributing to CSEC in the Philippines (Ward & Roby, 2004) among numerous other systemic factors such as rapid urbanization and the inequitable distribution of wealth (Silva, 2002). In the Philippines, more than 40% of the population lives below the poverty line and during the 1990s, the number of street-involved children in the Philippines is said to have increased from nearly 250,000 to 1.5 million. This expansion of street-involved children, along with the extensive, overall expansion of communities of the urban poor is an indication of the rapid urbanization experienced in the Philippines over the past few decades.

Street-involved boys in Manila are reported to be significantly less likely to have had any contact with their immediate families compared with street-involved girls (80% compared to 63%) potentially creating a unique vulnerability to exploitation and violence. Similarly, the most common forms of abuse for males is reported to be neglect and abandonment (39.4%) followed by abuse from youth offenders (28.1%) and physical abuse (15.3%) (Silva, 2002). Merrill, Njord, Njord, Read, & Pachano (2010) find that Filipino street-involved children not living at home 83% (1.83 times) more likely to be involved in street prostitution, 74% (1.74 times) more likely to exhibit substance abuse, 52% (1.52 times) more likely to feel isolated, and nearly twice as likely to have had suicidal ideations within the past year, compared with children who living at home (Merril et al., 2010).

Within the Philippines, the sexual abuse of boys is a reality that is similarly left unspoken. As in other parts of Southeast Asia, boys are often presumed to be innately 'tough' and able to protect themselves. If a young male 'allows' himself to be prey to others, it is common that he will be blamed for not living up to his masculine expectations (Grubman-Black, 1990; Watkins & Bentovim, 1992). Additionally, within the conservative context of the Philippines, sex, and sexuality (particularly same-sex sexuality) is seldom discussed and little understood. Within this context, it is common for boys to perceive their abuse as a sign of their homosexuality. If the boy failed to resist his attacker or if he experienced sexual arousal during the abuse this feeling is especially heightened (Watkins & Bentovim, 1992).

Because of this stigma and the resulting fears of discrimination, boys are less likely to report instances of sexual abuse. This is complicated by the fact that the age of consent in the Philippines is 12, the lowest age of consent in Asia, but does forbid sexual contact with a minor (under the age of 18) if the child has consented to the sexual act in exchange for money, gain, or any other kind of remuneration. This legal framework can muddle legal cases brought against perpetrators if a street-involved child would report sexual violence by an adult, especially in cases where some form of remuneration has been provided. Males may be particularly vulnerable as they are commonly seen as more resilient and are less likely to be identified as a victim (Dube et al., 2005; Holmes, Offen & Waller, 1997; Lisak, 1994). Consequently, data demonstrate that cases of sexual abuse are far less likely to be reported to law enforcement in the Philippines when the victim is a male (15.1%), compared with when the victim was female (34.1%). The National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children (NBS-VAC) report (2016) states that one in five children below 18 in the Philippines has experienced some form of sexual violence. This number was notably higher among males with 24.7 percent of boys to have experiences at least some form of sexual violence before the age of 18, in comparison to 18 percent of females (UNICEF 2016). Despite this growing awareness, the language used within the study tended to highlight female experiences of violence, and surrounding media coverage did not disaggregate for gender when males were found to be pronounced vulnerability to violence (Takumi, 2016). Further, male vulnerability to sexual violence commonly evades government statistics. Looking at the 2011 statistics from the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development (2012), of the department's 1,401 cases of sexual abuse, only 29 of these cases (2%) were cases of abuse against males, while 1,372 (98%) were females.

In this study, the researchers aim to provide a baseline of information and initial analysis of the critical needs, vulnerabilities, and potential resiliencies of street-involved boys in Manila. Furthermore, the research aims to initiate a more

nanced and informed discussion on a male vulnerability in the Philippines for social service providers, policy makers, child-protection advocates, and social researchers. Social workers from three local NGOs in Manila conducted 51 in-depth, structured interviews, which utilize both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, and fieldwork with street-involved boys presently living and working on the streets of Manila.

## METHODS

### Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted through three different local NGOs; as such, there was no immediate governing body to apply for ethical approval. Therefore, to ensure the protection of the participants, all social workers conducting the study were given ethical training for research with vulnerable people groups using the UNIAP Ethical Guidelines for Human-Trafficking Research (2009). All interviews in this study were conducted in the Filipino (Tagalog) language by social workers from three organizations operating in the Manila area: Bahay Tuluyan, Kanlungan Sa Erma, and Onesimo Bulilit Foundation. Each of these organizations specializes in working with street-involved children and already has built rapport within each of their respective communities in which they provide their services.

Social workers worked to establish rapport with participants before the survey. They provided each participant with information concerning the research and its purpose; assurance of anonymity and confidentiality; information regarding the personal and sensitive nature of the interview, and questions to be asked; and, the boys' right to choose not to answer any question, stop the survey, and/or withdraw from the study at any time. After this explanation, respondents were able to either provide verbal consent or to continue or decline participation in the study, and their response was recorded by the interviewer. For younger boys, surveys were designed to be age-relevant. After careful consideration of the needs and context of younger street-involved boys, verbal survey questions were structured in such a way so that individual sections could be skipped for street-involved boys under the age of 12.

However, if a child under the age of 12 disclosed sexual intercourse or sexual abuse, and was comfortable talking about the subject, interviewers were instructed to continue through the full set of questions as they would with a child over the age of 12, at their, and the child's, discretion. No written informed consent was possible due to varying literacy skills. As a way of thanking the children for their participation, a toiletry kit including a washcloth, toothbrush, shampoo, soap, and other necessary items was provided to the boys for helping with the survey, but completing the survey was not a requirement to receive it. Local social workers identified this kit to be the most appropriate form of compensation for the respondents' participation as it was not valuable to the point of compelling participation, but would help respondents with their hygiene needs and replace and funding they might otherwise have earned in the time it took to complete the survey. As the NGOs working with street children were involved in the interviews they were in the best position to provide counselling and support following any disclosures.

## Sampling

This study incorporates both purposive and “snowballing” data sampling methodologies. The lead researcher worked with key social workers from Bahay Tuluyan, Kanlungan Sa Erma, and Onesimo Bulilit Foundation to identify and map locations in each of the organization’s respective areas of service, where street-involved boys were known to congregate, live, and work. Participants for the study were typically met either on the street within the service areas of each respective organization or within drop-in centers operated by each of the three implementing organizations. Due to concerns for the safety and privacy of the participants, all participants encountered on the street were invited to a drop-in or child development center, after agreeing to participate in an interview. Additionally, after completing an interview, boys were asked if they were aware of other boys who might also be willing to participate in the study. This method of gaining participants (known as chain-referral or ‘snowballing’) allowed the research team to follow the social networks of young boys working throughout the Manila area.

Throughout July and August of 2014, social workers from these three organizations held structured interviews with 51 street-involved (street-living or street-working) boys from the Manila area. Of these 51 boys, 21 interviews (41%) were conducted by social workers or teachers from Onesimo Bulilit Foundation, 16 interviews (31%) were conducted by social workers from Kanlungan Sa ErMa Foundation, and 14 interviews (27%) were conducted by social workers from Bahay Tuluyan.

## Research Instrument

The questionnaire was comprised of 86 questions (excluding numerous sub-questions). Questions were a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions covering a variety of topics surrounding the life and context of street-involved boys including: demographics, social relationships, personal and family finances, social and emotional feelings, stigma and discrimination, sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC), sexual health, violence, income generation, and future planning. The questions used for this study were adapted from previous research instruments used to gather a holistic baseline of information from street-involved children in Sihanoukville, Cambodia (Davis & Miles, 2014) as well as similar instruments used to explore the vulnerabilities of young male entertainment workers in Cambodia, The Philippines, and Thailand. In adapting the questionnaire for Filipino boys in Manila, the lead researcher worked with child rights specialists to ensure that questions were appropriate to be asked to young boys and consulted with social practitioners in Manila to ensure that questions were also appropriate for the Philippine cultural context. Additionally, the final draft of the questionnaire was scrutinized by focus groups of social workers from each of the three implementing organizations in Manila. These reviewers critiqued the questionnaire and suggested additional questions based upon their specific knowledge of the street-involved boys in the Manila area.

## RESULTS

Surveys were analyzed using SPSS 20.0. Both descriptive and thematic analyses were utilized. Descriptive analyses were used to examine the frequency of various responses. Thematic analysis was used to explore the responses to open-ended questions included in the survey, with key features of this data coded and

sorted systematically to reflect patterns in the data and inform themes and sub-themes relevant to the questions used in the survey (Boyatzis, 1998).

### **Demographics**

The ages of participants (n=51) in this study ranged nine years (10-19 years) with a mean age of 14 years old. Only 42% of participants (n=48) cited enrolment in school. Most participants (65%) indicate that they are native to the Metro-Manila area, while only 35% indicate migrating, primarily from rural or provincial areas. The most common reasons for participants having to live on the street (n=28) includes; the death of a parent (17%); poverty (17%); and being cast out (13%). Other reasons were cited and split evenly between the remaining 13 participants. A minority of street-involved boys (41%) stated that they were living in some form of constructed shelter. The remaining participants (59%) cited sleeping either directly on the streets or in various forms of temporary coverings made of cardboard or plastic scraps. Most participants (58%) cited that they did not feel safe within their communities (n=23). The most popular reasons given for not feeling safe include bullying (22%), fighting/rioting (17%), and a fear of being taken by street-child 'rescue' operations conducted by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) (17%).

### **Street Work**

The type of work, time working on the street, as well as who/what brought them to street work was recorded and displayed (see Figure 1).

### **Stigma and Discrimination**

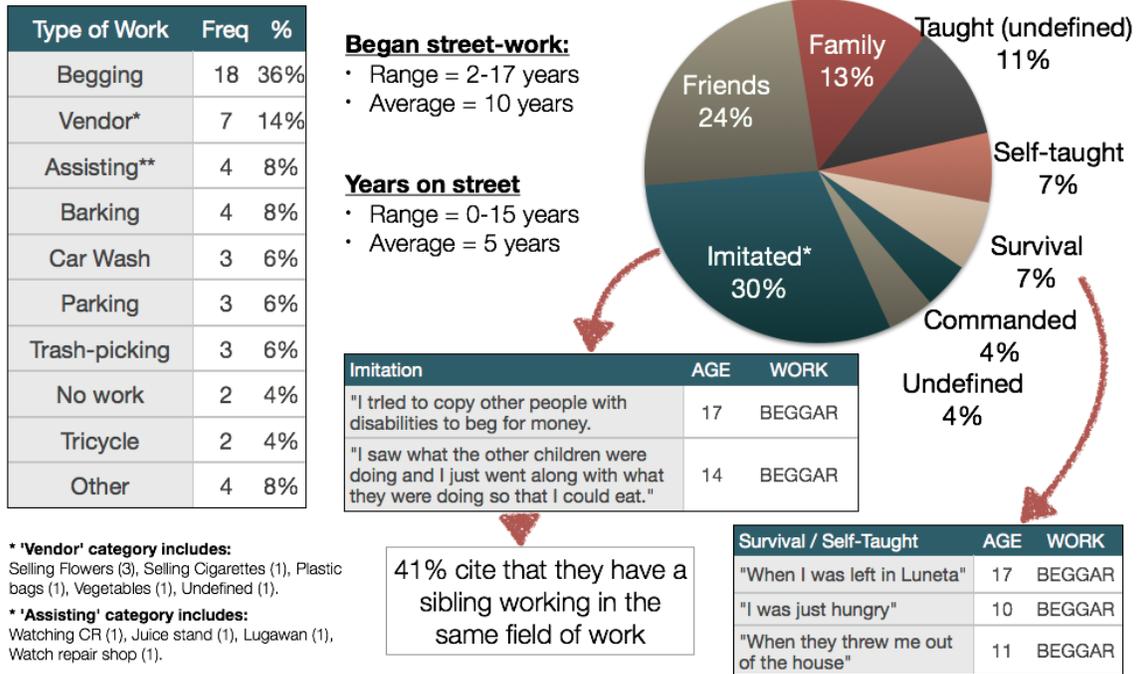
Interviews also explored how street-involved boys believed that people who see them on the streets perceive them. An overwhelming majority of participants (n=45; 73%) describe a variety of antagonistic feelings that they perceive people to have about them. Nine participants (20%) describe what they perceive people, in general, to have feelings of pity for them among this group. Lastly, two boys (5%) describe what they perceive people to have positive feelings for them, while one boy (2%) describes people as having a mixture of positive and negative feelings about him. A more in-depth look into self-perceptions was, and subsequent perceived antagonistic feelings were recorded (see Figure 2).

### **Sexual Abuse**

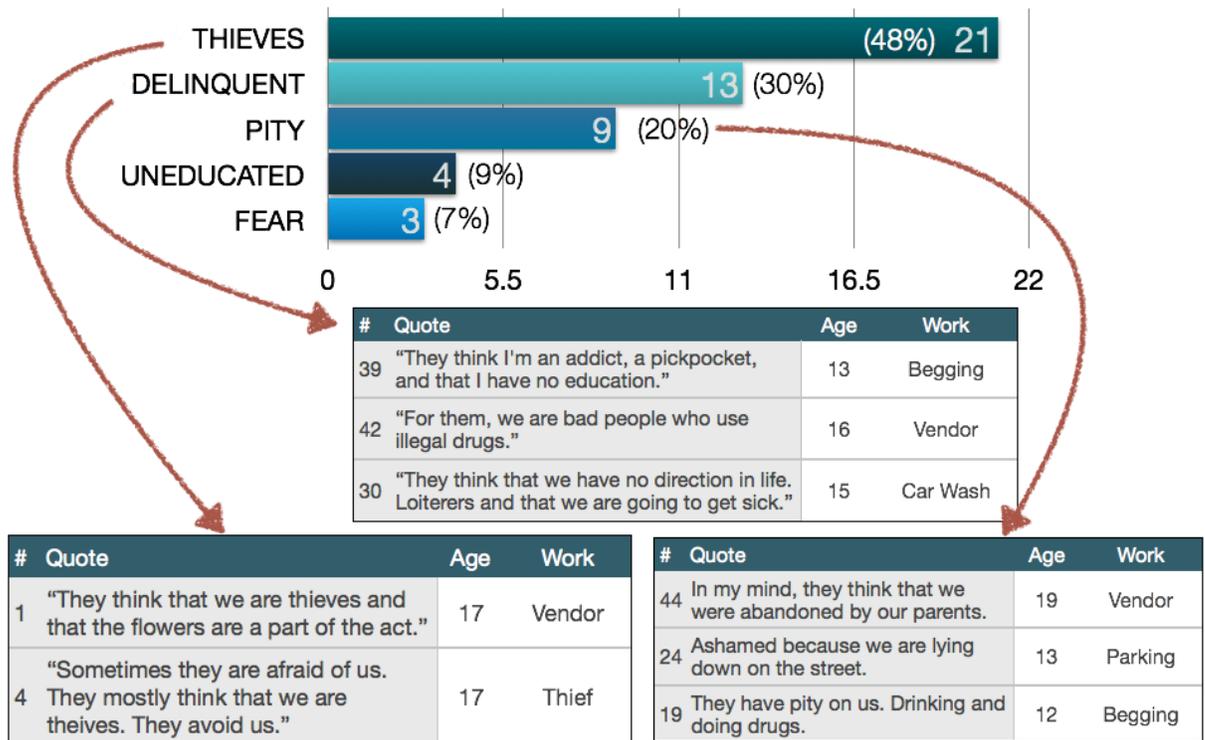
#### **Awareness**

An overwhelming majority of participants (76%) cited that they are aware of boys who have been asked by adults to do sexual things (n=51). Over half of these participants (n=38; 56%) identified these adults to be local Filipinos, while 30% identified these adults to be a mixture of both Filipinos and foreigners. Fifteen percent believe these adults to be foreigners. In addition to their awareness of others who are sexually abused, participants were asked to estimate how many street-involved boys, out of 10, they believed would be asked by adults to do something sexual. Participants stated that on average, 5 to 6 street-involved boys (mean is 5.48) would be approached by an adult to do something sexual.

**Figure 1: Overview of Respondent’s Entry into Street-work, Age When Beginning Street-work, Length of Time in Street-work, and Types of Work on the Street**



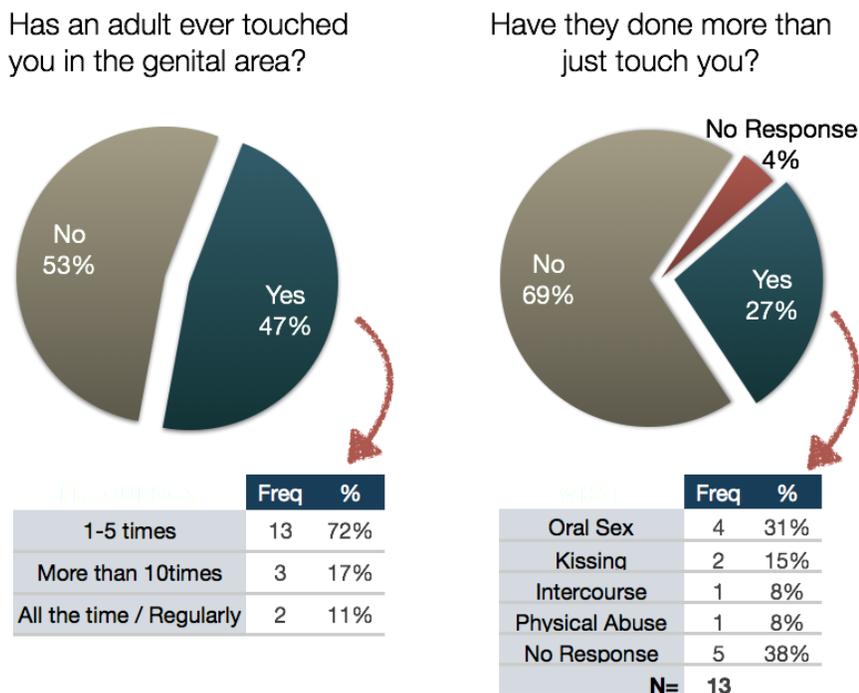
**Figure 2: Respondent’s Understandings of How They Are Perceived by People on the Street**



### Experiences

Most participants responding to this question (n=17, 65%), define a variety of sexual acts that adults have asked them to do (see Figure 3). The average age at which participants cite first experiencing a sexual touch by an adult is 11 years of age (range: 3-17). Beyond this, 18% cite adults forcing them to steal, and 12% stated instances of adults forcing them to take drugs.

**Figure 3: Experiences of Sexual Touching and Other Sexual Experiences**



Beyond experiencing direct sexual abuse from an adult, participants were asked to describe instances in which they may have been asked by an adult to have sex with another child. Of the participants responding to this question (n=41), 10% cited instances in which this has happened.

### Pornography

Of the participants that responded to this question (n=45), nearly half (49%) cited instances in which adults had shown them pornographic pictures or videos. Among this group (n=22), the majority cited being shown pornographic pictures or videos by either an adult friend (35%) or a stranger (35%). To a lesser extent, 20% cited being shown pornography by an adult in their community. One participant cites being shown pornography by an adult at a computer shop, with another who cited being shown pornography by an adult that he knows on Facebook. Three participants (n=44) went further by stating when asked, that they had been asked by adults to be filmed or photographed for pornographic material.

### Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSEC)

More than a quarter (27%) of all participants (n=51) described instances of sexual abuse in exchange for money, food, or gifts. Nearly an additional quarter (24%) cited instances in which they have received money directly for sexual services

provided to an adult. In addition to receiving money themselves, four participants reported instances in which someone else has received money, food, or a gift in exchange for sexual services provided to an adult. The average age at which participants indicated having first been sexually exploited on the streets was between 13 and 14 years of age (range: 9-17).

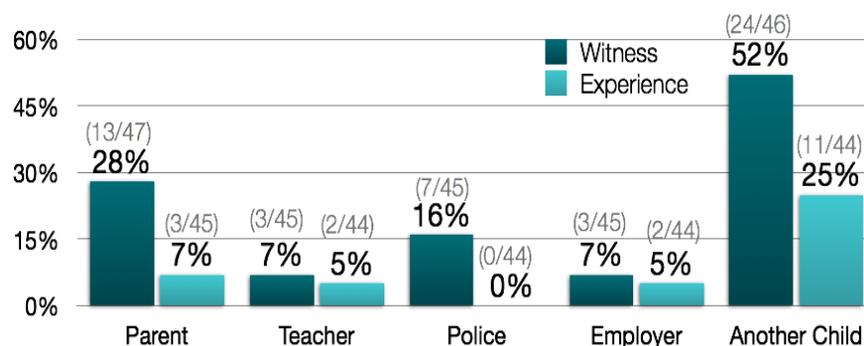
### Physical Violence

Physical violence was reported by the vast majority of respondents, with violence most commonly coming from parents and police officers. Parents are most commonly cited as the actors of physical violence with 85% (n=49) of boys citing some form of physical abuse from their parents and 88% indicating that they had witnessed the physical abuse of other children by their parents. A comparatively high majority of boys (n=44, 57%) also cited having personal experiences physical abuse/violence from police officers, many indicating extreme and violent forms of abuse, which commonly include being kicked in the face and stomach (typically after being caught sleeping on the streets) and being electrocuted (tasing). Nearly three-in-four boys (n=46, 72%) cited having witnessed the physical abuse of another child by a police officer. Physical abuse from teachers was also notably common with 43% citing personal experiences of physical abuse from a teacher and slightly more than two-thirds of participants (n=46, 67%), citing that they have witnessed the physical abuse of a child by a teacher. Nearly one-third of participants (n=44, 30%) cited witnessing an employer using physical violence against another child. A smaller percentage, 13%, of participants cited personal experiences of physical violence coming from employers. Physical violence coming from other children was also found to be commonplace among street-involved boys. A substantial majority of participants (n=47, 81%) cited witnessing another child using physical violence against another child. To a similar extent, 77% cited personally being the victim of physical violence from another child.

### Sexual Violence

A substantial majority of all participants (69%) reported some level of sexual violence from at least one of the five defined figures (see Figure 4). This is significantly higher than the 47% of participants, earlier in the survey, who cite being sexually touched on the genitals by an adult.

**Figure 4: Experiences of Sexual Violence from Particular Figures**



### Receiving Help

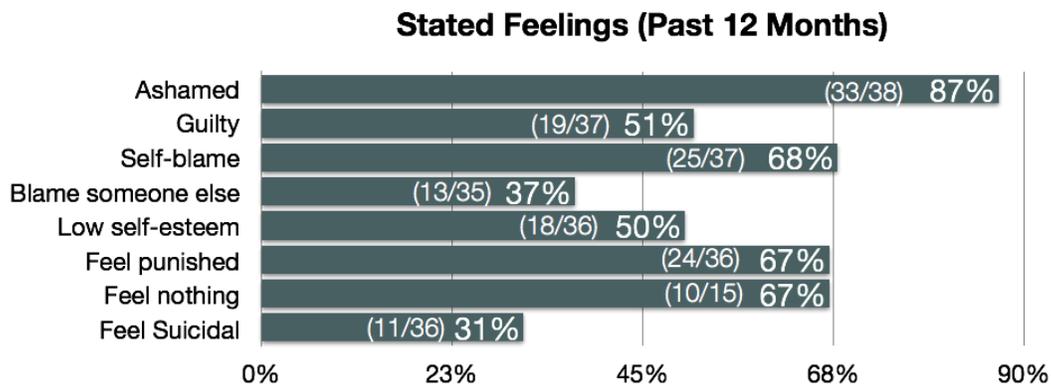
Many participants (n=27, 74%) indicated that they did have someone that they could go to with their difficulties. Among those who cite having someone that they could go to, most participants, 56%, had a friend that they go to, 16% said their

mother, 6% said a caretaker, and another six boys said a social worker. To a much lesser extent, ‘father,’ ‘mother and father,’ ‘other relative,’ ‘sibling,’ and ‘my teacher’ were mentioned each by one participant. Among the 31 participants (69%) who disclosed receiving some level of sexual violence, only six participants (12%) had ever asked anyone for help.

**Feelings**

In terms of feelings, the most notable theme found among participants were low valuations of themselves (see figure 5). For several participants, feelings of shame and self-blame are tied with their work on the streets. For others, these feelings are tied with experiences of abuse.

**Figure 5: Respondent’s Feelings Associated with their Work on the Streets (In the Past 12 Months)**



**Substance Abuse**

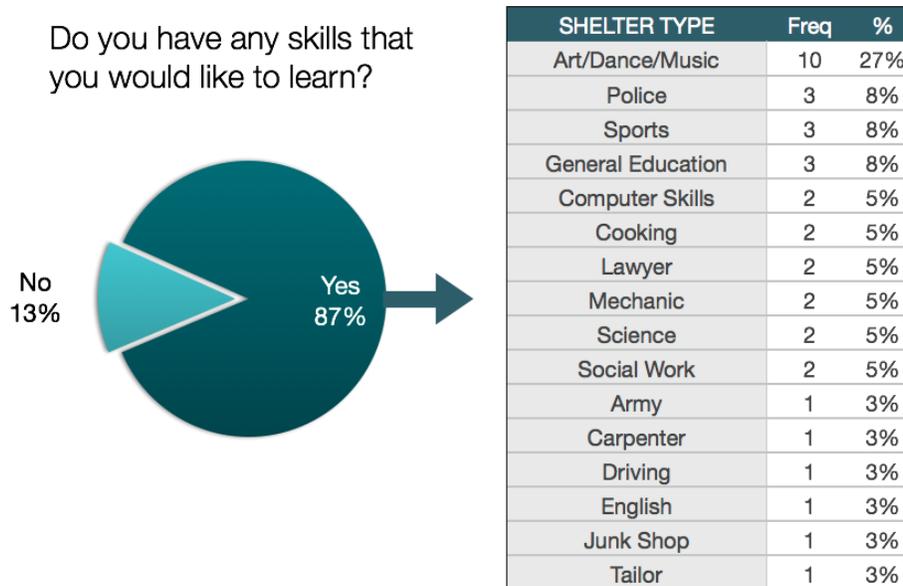
Alcohol usage was found to be very common among street-involved boys with half of all participants citing using alcohol. While drinking seemed to be commonplace, participants did not report frequent usage of alcohol. Among those who cited usage, 35% reported drinking alcohol ‘once in a while,’ and 25% (10 boys) mention drinking only ‘sometimes.’

Well over one-third of participants (38%) said they used illegal drugs. Among these participants (n=18), 72% cited huffing solvents, 44% smoked marijuana, and 22% used crack cocaine. Most commonly, participants cited friends or peer pressure 65% as the reason for using these drugs. Beyond this, 12% explained that they used drugs as a means of dealing with emotions. Another 12% cited using drugs as a product of huffing glue. One participant cited using drugs due to an addiction, and another participant said he used drugs because someone forced him.

**Future Alternatives**

A substantial majority of participants (77%) cited that learning a foreign language would help their income generation. An even larger majority (87%) cited specific skills that they hope to be able to learn for their future (see figure 6). Among this group (n=40), many participants (27%) cited desiring skills in the area of art, dance, or music.

**Figure 6: Alternative Skills Respondents Desire to Learn**



Beyond this, 27% indicate a bleak outlook for the next two years of their lives. Another 27% gives neutral responses for the future. Over a third (35%) of responses involve completing studies, 14% see themselves still working on the streets, 12% see themselves in some other kind of work.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the researchers have been able to provide a baseline of information and initial analysis of the critical needs and vulnerabilities of street-involved boys in Manila. Primarily, these include: stigma and discrimination; sexual abuse, which includes pornography and CSEC; physical and sexual violence; as well as feeling shame, guilt and suicidal. The specifics into the vulnerabilities these boys have, as well as the individuals that cause this abuse, vary between areas in Manila. The overall results have significance to the underreporting of the sexual, as well as physical abuse of street-involved boys in the Philippines as well as to the way NGOs can effectively aid those street-involved boys that experience sexual abuse.

Considering all forms of sexual abuse, including disclosures of adults showing boys pornographic images, as many as 65% of street-involved boys (or 33 of the 51 participants) in Metro-Manila disclose some form of sexual abuse. In this study, sexual abuse is understood as a sexual act committed against a child, which includes inappropriate touching and further sexual acts in a situation in which a child does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent, or for which the child is not yet developmentally prepared (UNCRC, 6). The age of consent in the Philippines is 12, which is the lowest age of consent in Asia. This means that under Philippine law, a child cannot consent to any form of sexual contact with an adult before the age of 12. However, Philippine law forbids sexual contact with a minor

(under the age of 18) if the child has consented to the sexual act in exchange for money, gain, or any other kind of remuneration. Within this study, money, food, and gifts were found to be used as a means of coercion for a child to consent to sexual abuse, which is defined as exploitation. These data sharply contrast with results found in the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) (2011) report. Although the Philippine Government's study had a sample 27.5 times the size of the sample in this study, the results show that this research found more cases of sexual abuse against boys (33 cases vs. 29 cases). This supports the notion that the underreporting of the sexual abuse of boys is prevalent in the Philippines, even on a national level.

While it may not be possible to provide a detailed, quantitative analysis of these themes of violence, a few broad themes were clear among reported instances of sexual violence against street-involved boys. For instance, many cases of child sexual exploitation seem to come from opportunistic encounters within areas of the city locally known as areas where children can be found for sex. While only 26% of street-involved boys cite being provided with food, money, or other forms of remuneration for sexual services, 76% of the boys interviewed cite that they are aware of children who are asked by adults to provide sexual services. Qualitative data indicate that most of these cases are opportunistic, indicating that perpetrators meet the boys on the street and have not necessarily had any prior contact with them. Remuneration for sexual services varied from case-to-case and was often in the form of simple items for survival such as food or small amounts of money.

Most of the encounters described to take place in these areas seem to be mostly opportunistic and are used as a means of survival for some street-involved youth, but a few of these instances seem to suggest that child sex brokers or “pimps” could also be involved. This aligns with previous literature to the extent that poverty is a primary factor that contributes to CSEC in the Philippines (Ward & Roby, 2004). It can be inferred; therefore, that for participants in this study poverty is an essential motivator for participating in sex acts with adults as they are offering remuneration that can aid the participants' survival. However, information on the extent of the involvement of brokers is not made explicit from interviews. More focused, qualitative research, including more extensive field research on the involvement of child sex work in the Manila area (and perhaps other regions of the Philippines), is much needed, particularly concerning the extent pimps and brokers are present in the lives of street-involved boys.

Throughout the dataset, there are sporadic points which indicate social networking services, such as Facebook, to be both in high demand and a strong potential venue for sexual exploitation among street-involved children; however significant gaps in this baseline data prevent any conclusive findings. However, it is known that computer use at Internet cafés was cited as a top expense for nine boys or one in six (18%) of those interviewed. Additionally, anecdotal information from service providers cites the usage of social networking platforms, such as Facebook, to be almost ubiquitous among street-involved boys in the Metro-Manila area. Related and more focused research on the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse and exploitation through social media, as well as the role, played by the inexpensive Internet cafés located throughout the metro-Manila area is needed. While it is not clear from these limited data points, it would be useful for research to explore the extent to which such internet cafes are used as venues for sexual exploitation or areas where children may be groomed for abuse or exploitation with porn. More

understanding is needed to bring further understanding of this as a potential vulnerability for Filipino youth.

While most discussions on violence against children focus on adults as perpetrators, it may be essential to note the various forms of violence against children that are committed by other children. Within this study, experiences of sexually harmful behavior from other youth was an ongoing theme of violence disclosed by street-involved boys, cited by 25% of the participants interviewed. Beyond sexually harmful behavior, experiences of other forms of physical violence from other youth were a common theme among most boys interviewed. While one in four boys report experiences of sexual violence from other youth in their communities, more than three in four participants (77%) report physical violence from other youth.

Within this context, one factor possibly contributing to this vulnerability is the lack of supervision by adults in their communities. Nearly all street-involved boys in the Metro-Manila area indicated that they either work with peers (78%) or alone (14.5%) and few seem to have parents or other adults providing any form of supervision. Most research focusing on the vulnerabilities of young children focuses only on adults as the perpetrators of sexual violence. While research such as this may be useful, further research is needed to understand the dynamics involved in cases such as these when children abuse other children sexually, physically, and otherwise, mainly, why a lack of parental/adult supervision could result in increased in physical and sexual violence between street-involved children.

### **Limitations**

In this survey, the researchers choose to believe the information given by participants to be accurate accounts of their experiences on the streets. However, it is understood that some street-involved children may be accustomed to giving inaccurate information as a means of survival. A few considerations have been made in order to counter some of these potential inaccuracies. During training, interviewers were trained to take careful note of the body language of participants to be aware of instances in which children may have felt uncomfortable in answering questions truthfully. Throughout the data collection process, interviewers were encouraged to provide annotations on each survey indicating any variables, in which they perceived participant's statements to be unreliable. Secondly, survey questions in the research instrument were constructed with internal redundancies to check for consistency throughout the whole of each interview. During the data cleaning and initial analysis, any variables that were held in significant question were removed from the data sampling. This resulted in a lower 'n'-value on some questions, but greater accuracy in the final dataset.

The research team believed that it was important for interviews to be conducted by local social workers or child protection workers that were already known within the child's community to be able to establish trust with the participants. While this may be useful for establishing rapport and creating a safe space for participants to speak about their experiences, this may also have posed a challenge to data accuracy. It is possible that some participants could have felt uncomfortable in disclosing some information, due to fears that it may have changed the way the social worker perceived the child. While this is possible, in many cases, it was found that prior knowledge of social workers aided in the comfort level of the boys and aided the disclosure of information.

In some cases, it is possible for sexual violence to become ‘normalized’ as a part of a boy’s life. This is often a coping strategy in children who have experienced considerable amounts of violence regularly. Normalization such as this could have caused some boys to have understood some forms of sexual abuse as a normal part of their life and thus be less likely to label such instances as ‘abuse’ or something that needs to be reported. While great care was taken in considering each child’s understanding of sexual violence, it is possible (and even likely) that some experiences of sexual violence remained undisclosed due to such normalization. The gender of the perpetrator was not asked.

In many cases, instances of sexual violence against street-involved boys are multi-faceted and they are committed by a variety of individuals (i.e. peers, family members, teachers, employers, and individuals on the streets), thus there are limitations in these findings, including the presence of clear themes of sexual violence among street-involved children. More focused research considering larger groups of street-involved children would be needed to provide a more adequate, in-depth understanding of such experiences among the children living or working on the streets in the Metro-Manila area. Furthermore, it should be noted that while these results demonstrate the underreporting of sexual abuse, they shed little insight as to the causes of this. Further research should be conducted to understand the themes that contribute to this underreporting including gender roles, a lack of legal protections, and perceived resilience of street-involved boys.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the limitations of this research several recommendations can be provided to reduce the vulnerabilities street-involved boys have to physical and sexual violence. The vulnerability of boys and young men to sexual exploitation and violence is seldom discussed within development circles in the Philippines and the broader region. As such, it is crucial that advocacy initiatives, training, and social work education use language that recognizes the reality of male vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation. The DSWD should increase their efforts to represent and serve both males and females. As a part of this, it will be necessary to develop better reporting mechanisms for victims of sexual abuse. In addition to girls, boys and young men must be provided with spaces in which they can be heard, empowered, and educated on their rights as children.

Beyond the role of the DSWD, providing spaces for street-involved boys to be able to speak out and be heard is something that needs to be extended to all levels of Philippine society, particularly regarding sexual abuse and exploitation. This includes the sensitization of law enforcement, families and service providers, who may not believe or take accounts of sexual violence against boys and men seriously as they would violence against women and girls. Additionally, this sensitization should be extended to males themselves, challenging gender norm and allowing space for males to express their vulnerabilities without removing or challenging their masculine identities.

Current research and social programming in the Philippines are commonly implemented with a top-down approach, with social practitioners and educated experts serving as the prime sources of information and authority on the needs of vulnerable street-involved groups. Children are often left at the receiving end of social services and often have little to no input in the development of programming

to meet their needs or even the definition of what their needs are. Similarly, it is often consultants and public health experts who undertake research, developing questions that they have deemed to be most important to explore vulnerability factors in a child's life. While adult input is needed, it is similarly important that researchers and practitioners allow children to serve as the 'experts of their own realities,' utilizing their experiences and understandings of their environments to develop better and more child-centered social programs and research methodologies.

There is a need for the development and utilization of comprehensive educational resources for awareness and prevention of sexual abuse/exploitation, such as [www.good-touch-bad-touch-asia.org](http://www.good-touch-bad-touch-asia.org) and the accompanying training developed by the Stairway Foundation. There is a need for better advocacy and vigilance for children within their communities. It is crucial for parents and other adults to understand that boys are equally at risk of abuse as well as girls and that they need protection. Community centers, youth clubs, and churches should introduce education about sex, appropriate loving relationships, sexual abuse, and the dangers of pornography, and work to provide a safe and non-condemning place for children and young adults to discuss sex and sexuality.

The Philippine Government has been very active in passing legislation aimed at the protection of females, as well as numerous institutional reforms and new programs to prevent violence against women and children. In addition to these institutional reforms, the Philippine government has signed all United Nations declarations and conventions on women and children and has gone much ahead of other countries in devising concrete measures to address women's issues, particularly violence against women. While these reforms are meaningful, boys and men are commonly denied the structural and legislative protections that are readily afforded to women and girls. It is essential that such structural and legislative foci do not imply that men and boys are not vulnerable to exploitation and violence, but rather exist to ensure that all people, regardless of gender have adequate protections and services accessible to meet their needs.

Participants in this study perceive high levels of stigma, discrimination, and general antagonism from the public at large. In addition, boys cite high levels of violence coming from teachers and police officers, as well as experiencing negative emotions, particularly shame, associated with their life on the streets. Given this, public awareness campaigns within communities and through media would be helpful to aid in communicating the humanity, dignity, and personhood of street-involved children (both boys and girls). As an alternative to the perception of street-involved children as shameful nuisances or public 'eyesores,' it is vital that media, NGOs, and other socially-involved agencies work to educate both the public and politicians on the deeper, systemic social and economic realities that underpin the issue of street-involved children.

Children in this study indicate a high interest in arts, music, dance, and sports. It may be essential to utilize these interests and resources to both develop the self-identities, expression, and confidences of street-involved children, as well as improving their perception within the public eye. Some of this could be accomplished through community initiatives such as mobile theatre, sports programs, art training programs, and other community development activities geared toward raising the awareness and perception of street-involved groups. All children have the rights to a family, a home, health, education, and freedom from violence and discrimination. Given this context and the limited literature available on sexual

exploitation and abuse of street-involved children, more research with these groups could help to understand better how government and non-government groups can better work to protect these children and ensure that their rights are protected.

Regarding violence, peers were commonly indicated as the perpetrators of both sexual and physical instances of violence. While sexually harmful behaviors among youth seem to be commonplace, few resources are available for caretakers and social practitioners to understand and meet the developmental needs of children who harm others. Further exploratory and qualitative research may be needed to explore the phenomenon of sexually harmful behaviors of children within the Philippines. Law enforcement officials were also found to have been common perpetrators of violence, including some extreme and brutal instances. More research would be useful for exploring the extent and prevalence of such instances of violence, including a review of child-protection training that officers have received, its content, application, and overall efficacy. Results from such research could serve as an informative baseline to aid the development of appropriate training for police officers in non-violent discipline and communication as well as understanding youth who have been traumatized.

The present study features only a small sampling of street-involved children and provides only a brief snapshot of some of the critical vulnerabilities that exist among these groups. It may be useful to expand the current dataset to include additional boys, as well as an equal sampling of girls to validate some of the initial findings within this study further, to provide comparative data on vulnerabilities between males and females.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides a brief look at some of the critical vulnerabilities to sexual violence and exploitation that exist among street-involved boys in Manila, Philippines. This is to help build a better understanding of this often-overlooked group of people in order for NGOs and social service providers to serve them better. The study finds street-involved boys in Manila to be deeply vulnerable to a wide range of violence, including sexual and physical violence with many boys dealing with this as a reality of their daily lives.

This study finds that sexual violence against males in Manila to be a significant, but largely absent from interventions and advocacy strategies. It is important for the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development to normalize the vulnerability of males and develop an intervention, response, support programs, and advocacy strategies that understand their unique needs, particularly among those living and working on the streets. In addition, future research should explore the capacities of NGOs and national services to meet the needs of male victims of sexual violence.

The study finds the needs and vulnerabilities of street-involved boys in Manila to be very diverse. While physical violence, sexual violence, family poverty, lack of education, and other related issues of vulnerability were common themes among interviews with street-involved boys the occurrence and severity of all of these factors vary considerably. Given this, it is essential for practitioners to realize that there cannot be one set of responses or a 'catch-all' solution/s to mitigate the vulnerabilities to exploitation and violence among street-involved groups. Instead,

street-involved children and their families should be offered individualized care and support for their needs.

While girls have long been viewed as victims, boys are victimized as well. It is vital that churches, NGOs and government groups adopt a holistic and balanced understanding of human vulnerability. Rather than approaching issues of sexual exploitation and violence from a gender-based perspective (read: female-based perspective), it may be more helpful to understand and communicate these as human issues that encompass males, females and even the variety of gender identities in between. It is important that we understand children, regardless of gender, as whole persons with their own individual sets of unique vulnerabilities and resiliencies. Without the development of such a nuanced and human-centered understanding of human vulnerability, significant groups of vulnerable persons are at risk to remain just as they are, hidden in plain sight.

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### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Jarrett Davis**, MA, is an independent, social researcher and consultant specializing in gender, exploitation, and violence. Over the past eight years, his work has focused on the vulnerabilities of people groups that are often overlooked in research, policy, and social development initiatives. He has led studies with a variety of international organisations focusing on sexual violence against males and LGBTQ persons throughout the Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand. He is currently based in New York, USA, where he is working as an Asia Research Consultant, up! International.

**Glenn Miles**, Ph.D., is a child health nurse with around 25 years of experience focused on child abuse and exploitation in south east Asia. He has pioneered several NGOs and projects in Cambodia and has facilitated a series of research projects listening to survivors of sexual exploitation both prostituted men, women, boys, girls and transgender and also men sex buyers. He does research, advocacy, training, and evaluation of programs. He is a Senior Researcher, with up! International.

### RECOMMENDED CITATION

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