



Lost Classrooms, Found Streets: Understanding the Roots and Realities of Deviant Behaviours Among Out-of-School Children in Africa

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Abstract :

This article presents a systematic review of the deviant behaviors of out-of-school street children in Africa. It explores the factors that drive children to the streets, the types of deviant behaviors they engage in, and public perceptions of this phenomenon. Fifteen empirical studies were selected from academic databases—Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, Dimensions, and PubMed—following PRISMA guidelines. Data were analyzed thematically through a narrative synthesis approach. The findings reveal that poverty, parental violence, and family disintegration are the main factors pushing children into street life and denying them access to education. Street children commonly engage in begging, violence, substance abuse, theft, and prostitution. Although public attitudes are mostly negative, some view their struggles as expressions of resilience and survival. The implications of this review emphasize the urgent need for integrated interventions involving governments, social organizations, and educational stakeholders to break the cycle of poverty and expand access to education. Promoting inclusive and equitable basic education is crucial for empowering vulnerable children and ensuring long-term social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Streetism, a phenomenon in which children live or work on the streets, has emerged as a persistent social challenge in many developing regions, particularly in Africa. The condition of *out-of-school street children* represents one of the most visible forms of child vulnerability, where education, protection, and welfare are systematically denied. Globally, efforts such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been launched to universalize education and eliminate inequality in access to learning. However, these initiatives have not yet succeeded in rescuing all children from the streets, as more than 263 million remain out of school worldwide, the majority residing in low-income countries in Africa (Anangisyé, 2020; Ladislav et al., 2024).

Despite the international commitment to educational inclusion, the African context continues to reveal deep-rooted disparities. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1980 reaffirmed the regional aspiration to guarantee basic education for every child. This vision was later reinforced by collaborative initiatives, such as the Global Out-of-School Children Initiative (OOSCI), spearheaded by UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, to understand and respond to the circumstances of children excluded from formal education (OAU, 1968; UNESCO, 2016). However, decades after these

commitments, the prevalence of street children remains alarmingly high. Studies across the continent have consistently indicated that poverty, family breakdown, child abuse, and social dislocation continue to drive children from homes and classrooms into street life (Mwaibingila & Mwakalinga, 2022; Shitindi et al., 2023; Gahungu et al., 2024).

Street life exposes children to environments that foster deviant and delinquent behaviours. In several African cities, these children survive through begging, theft, violence, and substance abuse (Kudenga, 2017; Nasiru & Abdulkadir, 2024). Such behaviours deviate from accepted social norms and often place them in conflict with law enforcement and public morality. While deviance is contextually defined, in most societies, it refers to actions that are inconsistent with social expectations, such as prostitution, robbery, or public disorder (Diriba, 2018; Cheserek & Kavivya, 2022). These acts not only violate social standards but also illustrate the coping strategies that street children develop to survive harsh urban realities.

Across Africa, the phenomenon exhibits regional and cultural variations. In East Africa, for instance, economic hardship and family disintegration are dominant causes of child streetism (Anangisye, 2020; Shitindi et al., 2023). In West Africa, particularly Nigeria and Ghana, street life is linked to unemployment, urban poverty, and the breakdown of traditional family systems (Adelakun & Ogbede, 2023; Alenoma, 2012). In North Africa, factors such as political instability and gender disparities have been associated with behavioural deviance among homeless children (Aslan, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2018). Despite these contextual differences, the pattern remains consistent—street children face multidimensional deprivation, encompassing poverty, neglect, violence, and lack of access to education.

While the deviant behaviours of street children often attract negative public judgment, societal perception is not uniform. Some communities perceive them as delinquents responsible for insecurity, while others view them as victims of structural poverty and neglect (Diriba, 2018; Julien, 2024). The duality of these perceptions reflects a complex moral dilemma—whether to condemn or rehabilitate. Governments and humanitarian organizations have employed various approaches, ranging from correctional to rehabilitative and preventive models; yet, the problem persists (Nasiru & Abdulkadir, 2024).

Although a growing body of research has investigated the conditions and coping strategies of street children, studies that systematically integrate these findings to illuminate behavioral patterns and social perceptions remain scarce. This gap highlights the need to synthesize existing evidence to understand both the causes and the social implications of streetism within African societies. Therefore, this study aims to systematically review empirical literature on *out-of-school street children* in Africa to (1) identify the key factors that push children into street life, (2) examine the nature of their deviant behaviours, and (3) explore how the public and educational stakeholders perceive these children. Through this synthesis, the paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of child streetism as both an educational and social phenomenon, and to provide a foundation for policy interventions aimed at reintegration and rehabilitation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach, adhering to the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). The purpose was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of empirical studies discussing street children, out-of-

school children, and deviant behaviours within African contexts. The qualitative orientation enabled deeper interpretation of thematic connections that emerged from previous findings. The review encompassed studies published between 2012 and 2025, written in English, and indexed in major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Dimensions, Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed. The keywords used were "street children," "out of school children," and "deviant behaviours." A total of 32 articles were initially identified, and 15 studies met all inclusion criteria after full-text review. The inclusion criteria focused on studies discussing street children, specifically those who were out of school, addressing deviant or maladaptive behaviours, presenting empirical data, written in English, and published within the stated timeframe.

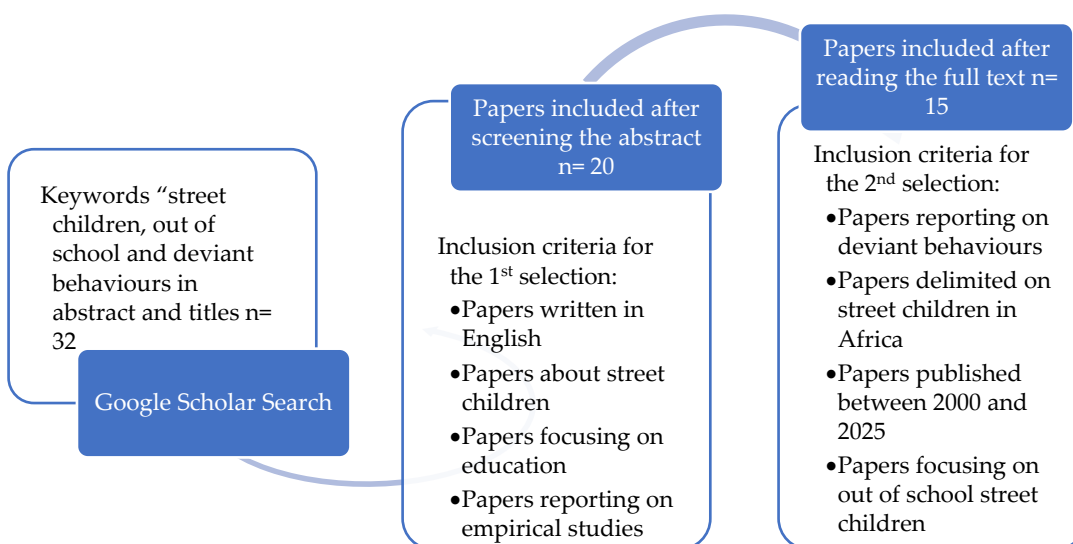


Figure 1. Presents the Literature Search and Selection Process following PRISMA flow
(source: Moher et al., 2009)

The data collection process relied on documentary analysis, which focused on examining published journal articles as secondary data sources. The process began by identifying potential studies using the selected keywords and filters across various databases. The abstracts and titles were then reviewed to determine relevance to the study objectives. Full-text screening was performed to confirm that each article met the established inclusion criteria. To ensure methodological quality, the Methodological Quality Questionnaire (MQQ) developed by Acosta et al. (2020) was used to assess the papers. The instrument evaluated five dimensions, namely theoretical and operational definitions, research and sampling design, sample characteristics, reliability and validity, and data analysis. Only papers with sufficient quality scores were retained for further synthesis. The assessment yielded an average MQQ score of 13.5, with a range of 3 to 21.

The data from the 15 selected studies were analysed using a thematic analysis approach through narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2006). This approach allowed the integration of diverse findings to identify patterns and conceptual relationships between street life, educational exclusion, and deviant behaviour. The analysis involved extracting key study details, grouping similar ideas into major themes, and synthesizing the evidence to develop a comprehensive narrative of how social, economic, and educational factors contribute to the phenomenon of street children across African countries.

Table 1. Summary of Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis Techniques

| No | Author(s) & Year | Country | Research Design & Approach | Data Collection Technique | Data Analysis Technique |
|----|---------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Anangisye (2020) | Tanzania | Qualitative | Interviews & Observation | Thematic Analysis |
| 2 | Mwaibingila & Mwakalinga (2022) | Tanzania | Mixed Methods | Questionnaire & Interview | Descriptive + Content Analysis |
| 3 | Kisirkoi & Mse (2016) | Kenya | Quantitative | Survey | Statistical Analysis |
| 4 | Cheserek & Kavivya (2022) | Kenya | Mixed Methods | Interview & Focus Group | Thematic + Statistical Analysis |
| 5 | Shitindi et al. (2023) | Tanzania | Qualitative | Interview & Document Review | Thematic Analysis |
| 6 | Gahungu et al. (2024) | Burundi | Qualitative | Interviews | Narrative Analysis |
| 7 | Aslan (2023) | Egypt | Quantitative | Structured Questionnaire | Descriptive Statistics |
| 8 | Mohamed et al. (2018) | Egypt | Quantitative | Survey | Descriptive & Correlation Analysis |
| 9 | Diriba (2018) | Ethiopia | Mixed Methods | Questionnaire & Interview | Descriptive + Thematic Analysis |
| 10 | Alenoma (2012) | Ghana | Quantitative | Survey | Statistical Analysis |
| 11 | Nasiru & Abdulkadir (2024) | Nigeria | Qualitative | Interview & Observation | Content Analysis |
| 12 | Shahabudin et al. (2021) | Sudan | Quantitative | Survey | Regression Analysis |
| 13 | Kudenga (2017) | Zimbabwe | Qualitative | Interview | Thematic Analysis |
| 14 | Shitindi et al. (2023) | Tanzania | Qualitative | Interview & Observation | Narrative Analysis |
| 15 | Adelakun & Ogbede (2023) | Nigeria | Quantitative | Questionnaire | Descriptive Statistics |

Source: Compiled from Reviewed Articles (2025)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results in this systematic review are subsequently presented based on respective research questions.

Reasons for throwing Children in Africa onto the streets

The analysis of reviewed studies indicates that most scholars have examined the underlying factors that push children in Africa to the streets at the expense of schooling. These studies identify a range of push and pull factors contributing to the phenomenon of streetism among children. Commonly cited causes include poverty, the search for income to support families, the inability of parents to meet educational expenses, escape from abusive parents, boredom, the desire for excitement, the pursuit of pocket money, female genital mutilation, family disintegration, and child-headed households (Anangisye, 2020; Mwaibingila & Mwakalinga, 2022; Kisirkoi & Mse, 2016; Shitindi et al., 2023; Gahungu et al., 2024; Aslan, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2018; Alenoma, 2012; Nasiru & Abdulkadir, 2024).

The systematic review shows that poverty, family breakdown, and domestic violence are the most prevalent and influential factors across the literature. Numerous African studies confirm poverty as a major driver of streetism and child begging (Seni, 2017; Fuseini & Daniel, 2020; Longi et al., 2022; Babangida et al., 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Olubusla, 2020; Adesokan & Owoyemi, 2022). Poverty limits families' ability to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, pushing children to seek survival on the streets.

Outside Africa, research from Asia similarly links poverty to street life and child begging. Studies in Pakistan and Egypt (Khan, 2018; Mansour, 2017; Shara et al., 2020) describe how economic hardship drives children to the streets and how impoverished families resort to begging as a last means of survival. Despite regional differences, poverty consistently emerges as the most dominant and recurring factor behind the street children phenomenon worldwide.

In developed contexts, the trend is similar though expressed differently. For example, a USAID–UNICEF–Save the Children report on Georgia highlights poverty as a primary reason children leave home (Wargan & Dershem, 2009). Likewise, research in Bangladesh identifies poverty as a major determinant of child streetism (Zinia, 2022). However, the divide between the Global South and Global North lies in practice: while street children often attract public sympathy and policy attention, the extent and effectiveness of interventions vary depending on regional priorities and resources.

Deviant Behaviours of Street Children

Street children engage in various behaviors commonly categorized as deviant, and numerous studies have examined these activities. Several papers identify begging as one of the most prevalent forms of deviant behavior among street children (Anangisye, 2020; Mwaibingila & Mwakalinga, 2022; Mohamed et al., 2018; Nasiru & Abdulkadir, 2024; Kudenga, 2017; Shitindi et al., 2023). Other studies highlight violence, substance abuse, cigarette selling, robbery, and prostitution as additional deviant behaviors (Gahungu et al., 2024; Kudenga, 2017). Although cigarette sales are legal, the involvement of minors in selling age-restricted products suggests a violation of child protection laws and norms regarding child labor. It also indicates potential exposure to more serious forms of deviance, as children engage in activities linked to adult behavior. Some studies further emphasize that demographic factors, particularly gender, influence children's vulnerability to participating in such behaviors (Cheserek & Kavivya, 2022).

Perceptions of Street Children

Public perception of out-of-school street children is twofold: the majority view them negatively, while a few hold more sympathetic perspectives. Some studies (Mwaibingila & Mwakalinga, 2022) depict their situation and street activities as acts of pretence or exploitation by adults, reinforcing negative stereotypes of their difficult lives. Similarly, street children are often perceived as victims of family failure or as a violent segment of society (Gahungu et al., 2024). In contrast, others recognize their efforts to earn a living and support their families, including elderly or disabled guardians (Diriba, 2018).

Regarding self-perception, research shows mixed attitudes among street children. Some view themselves as vulnerable individuals striving to survive, often considering schooling a waste of time (Adelakun & Ogbede, 2023). Others, however, see education

as a pathway out of hardship and aspire to return to school (Adelakun & Ogbede, 2023). Stress from family and peer environments also influences their behavior, sometimes leading to deviant or risky activities (Shahabudin et al., 2021). Moreover, personality traits have been linked to the likelihood of engaging in undesirable behavior (Aslan, 2023).

Overall, most literature portrays street children in a negative light—as destitute, impoverished, and marginalized individuals who wander the streets begging or doing petty jobs. Such portrayals reinforce public rejection and stigmatization (Julien, 2024). However, the level of societal support and the factors leading children to the streets vary across different geographical contexts.

Discussion

This systematic review addresses three questions, as outlined in the findings section. Regarding the reasons that lead children to live on the streets, poverty appears to be a major factor, as it often leads to involvement in street begging and failure to meet basic needs (Anangisye, 2020; Mwaibingila & Mwakalinga, 2022; Kisirkoi & Mse, 2016; Shitindi et al., 2023). These findings are in line with previous studies such as those by Seni (2017); Ramanaik et al, 2018, and Agyemang et al (2024), which regard poverty as creating a vicious circle of begging since poverty deprives children of their right to education and so are likely to lead a life in their adulthood, and so their children. Unlike articles reviewed, other studies have looked at the existence of street children as a consequence of social disparity, within individual countries and beyond.

Thus, the social disparity instigates the emergence of street children and resulting violence (Setyowati et al., 2021). Likewise, the articles reviewed did not dwell on explaining school situations as one of the reasons contributing to children being pushed to the streets. Thus, corporal punishment, bullying, negative teachers' attitude towards children, and lack of school facilities such as desks, absence of school feeding programmes account for the prevalence of the phenomenon of streetism (Charity et al, 2020). Generally, the phenomenon of street children culminates in a lack of the basic conditions needed for a dignified life and healthy development among these vulnerable children. It also leads to the denial of their right to access and participate fully in basic education (Ghosh, 2022). Conversely, reintegrating them and providing education is a viable intervention that is needed (Azzam et al., 2021).

On the deviant behaviours, the systematic review has shown that street children mainly exhibit violence, are involved in robbery, substance abuse, and prostitution (Gahungu et al, 2024, and Kudenga, 2017). A similar depiction of street children is noted in other previous studies. In this regard, sex offences have been reported as one of the prevalent behaviours even outside the African continent. Thus, in India (Senthivel et al, 2024) indicate how sex offences co-exist with other deviant behaviours. The reviewed articles have talked less about theft as one of the deviant behaviours noted in street children. Conversely, other studies, such as Setyowati et al (2021), have described theft as being one of the deviant behaviours that characterise street children.

Moreover, the systematic review has revealed a multifaceted perception of street children by the general public, where some take them positively, but the majority see them negatively. Thus, street children are mainly regarded as problematic as they beg, disturb through fearful deeds such as robbery and engagement in fornication (Adelakun & Ogbede, 2023; Kudenga, 2017). In alignment with these findings, other previous papers portray street children as being problematic and often are ignored, bullied, and

downplayed by being regarded as prostitutes or night queens (Hai, 2014; Setyowati et al, 2021). As that fundamental, incidents of sexual harassment and violence are also frequently practiced by the public against the street children, especially girls. Most of the street children themselves feel vulnerable due to their life circumstances, while others appear courageous as they manage to hustle for their family's survival. To such children, attending school was regarded as a waste of time (Adelakun & Ogbede, 2023).

This study contributes significantly to the field of Educational Management by presenting a comprehensive conceptual synthesis of the phenomenon of streetism in Africa through a systematic literature-based approach. It expands the understanding of how structural factors—such as poverty, family disintegration, and weak educational governance—affect access, participation, and retention in basic education. The study highlights how deficiencies in educational planning, policy implementation, and resource management perpetuate children's exclusion from formal schooling. By integrating cross-country findings, this review provides a strategic framework for educational managers, policymakers, and community-based institutions to design inclusive and sustainable interventions focusing on rehabilitation, family empowerment, and alternative education models. Academically, it enriches the discipline of Educational Management by offering evidence-based insights for developing management systems and policy practices that ensure equitable access to education for vulnerable and marginalized children across developing countries.

This systematic review aimed to address key research questions concerning the factors driving children in Africa to the streets, the deviant behaviors associated with street life, and how educational stakeholders and the general public perceive out-of-school street children. The review contributes to existing knowledge by examining the phenomenon of street children through the lens of behavioral patterns and societal perceptions.

Overall, street children emerge as a result of multiple interrelated factors that demand collective intervention to support their reintegration and withdrawal from street life. Their deviant behaviors stem from various causes, including poor parenting, exposure to harsh living conditions, and aspirations for a better life. These circumstances often lead to their labeling as troublesome or delinquent. Such perceptions reveal a gap between global and regional commitments or policies and their practical implementation. Reconsidering the future aspirations of street children—particularly access to basic education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)—is essential for sustainable reintegration and empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review highlights that poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, and social pressures are the primary factors pushing children in Africa to the streets and out of formal education. Street life exposes these children to deviant behaviours such as begging, violence, substance abuse, theft, and prostitution. While public perception is largely negative, some view street children as victims striving to support their families. This duality reflects the complex social dynamics surrounding streetism. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive interventions, including access to basic education and vocational training, to reduce deviance and guide street children toward constructive life paths. This study underscores the importance of socially inclusive policies and reintegration strategies that reflect the lived realities of street

children in Africa. It also opens opportunities for further research focused on gender-based experiences and localized intervention approaches.

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