

Home truths, out in the open

At least 37,459 children in the city have no shelter and are forced to live dangerously in streets, finds a study. **SUKANYA SHANTHA** digs deep to shed light on the plight of these homeless kids who face all kinds of abuse

ONCE Ammu hops into a 6:43 am train from Thane railway station, she spends a good five hours selling fancy accessories in the ladies' second-class compartment. She changes trains every two-three stations until she reaches CST station. From there she boards a train back to Thane. Barely seven, and unaware of her constitutional rights to education, home and shelter, Ammu carries a bulky 15-kg bag on her head and shuttles alone in the crowded trains. To call a home, she has a tin-shed under a flyover at Vikhroli and for a family, she has a minor sister, married when she was around 12, now with a three-month baby, already separated from her drunkard husband.

Like Ammu, there are at least 37,459 children dodging dangerous terrains and living on the streets, and in most cases, fending for themselves, according to a study by the Centre for Criminology and Justice (CCJ) department of the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS).

Several NGOs, enumerators and volunteers too worked with TISS to prepare the report, which can be said to be the first such detailed and comprehensive census on the city's street children.

The report which focuses on the socio-economic, education, work and family background of the children, attempts to understand why they live on the streets. The enumerators visited all 24 wards in the city along the three railway lines Central, Western and Harbour. A group of over 75 enumerators worked in each ward for two days over a period of three weeks.

A quantitative research reveals that one out of every four enumerated children has never been to school. Of the others enumerated, a mere two per cent have managed to study till Class X or above. "While studying the data, we found that while 25 per cent have remained illiterate, another 75 per cent have had some sort of education. With nearly 60 per cent living with their families on the street, most have been enrolled at a nearby municipal school or at least in an informal NGO set-up. It is interesting to discover that children and their families have tried to access education, but for want of any infrastructure and government support, a majority dropped out," says Asha Mukundan, a TISS professor who was a part of the study.

While the children could not manage access to any structural shelter space, an immediate relief would be in the form of night shelter to the children and providing educational facilities in these night shelters, Mukundan adds.

HAVING NO SHELTER, EXPOSED TO ABUSE

In fact, the Juvenile Justice Act requires every child to be protected and given shelter. This is also one of the many recommendations the report makes, besides demanding stronger commitment and urgency from the state and the central government towards the issue of street children and their problems.

Varsha Gaikwad, Minister for Women and Child Welfare, says she would re-look into the child policies and make provisions for shelter homes. "The state government will try and make better health facilities available for street children. All recommendations made in the report are accepted and we would try and work on them," she says.

The study states that one out of four children has experienced physical, sexual and verbal abuse in varied degrees. While the enumerators based their findings purely on the information provided by the children, experts say it could be grossly under-evaluated. "In our experiences of working with children, we have seen almost each child has been abused. From physical assaults to sexual, it's a part of these children's lived experiences," says Aroka Mary from NGO YUVA and member of the state's Juvenile Justice Board.

The study marks a change in trend

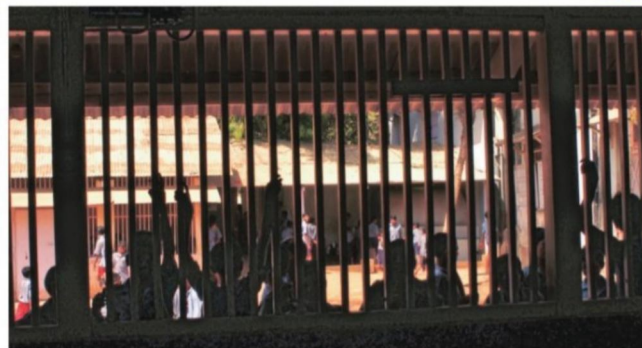


UNLIKE POPULAR perception, most of the homeless are not runaway kids. They live on the street with their families or a peer group. Only eight per cent live by themselves, an indicator that the children and their families in most cases are pushed to living in inhuman conditions on the street, Raghavan says.

Navi Mumbai and Thane, which have seen a dramatic boom in real estate business, employ child labour," Mukundan says. This is also one of the many reasons for a relatively conservative number of children available at the time of the study, she says.

With its initial estimation of at least one lakh street children, the survey report expresses surprise on finding less than 40,000 children. "Several blasts and security threats have made most areas like railway stations, which earlier saw a concentrated population of homeless, beyond their reach," said Alex George from Action Aid, India, which partnered in the study.

The report categorically marks out November 26, 2008, terror attack as one of the reasons that forced homeless families and street children to leave the



city. "Many are shooed out of the areas which provided them shelter for years. The homeless would take shelter outside railway stations, bus depots and big showrooms. But as the city has become a terror target, they are no more allowed to live. While the state ensured that homeless do not squat on the street, they have not followed the Supreme Court's guidelines to provide night shelters," says Mary.

While the Supreme Court has directed the state to provide a shelter home for every one lakh population, Maharashtra has remained non-committal.

The SC has also appointed High Court judges to monitor all shelter homes in the city. Justice V M Kanade of Bombay High Court says he will personally look into the conditions of shelter homes and a report will be periodically sent to the state government. "This report will help street children get a legal status and identity," Justice Kanade said during the release of the TISS report.

A SEPARATE CENSUS NEEDED FOR HOMELESS KIDS

The report acknowledges that the fig-

ure of approximately 40,000 children is highly conservative. Still it is higher than what was claimed by the government in its 2011 census data.

According to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), 35,408 people were found to be living on the street at the time of the counting on the night of February 28, 2011. "It is grossly underplayed," Mukundan claims.

Professor Vijay Raghavan of CCJ, TISS, says, "There is a pressing need to have a separate census on just the homeless children as they have clearly been missed out in every nature of gov-

A quantitative research reveals that one out of every four enumerated children has never been to school

ernment enumeration." Puncturing a few myths, the report claims that though most children with disabilities were born with it, a sizable population acquired it during road accidents, abuse or illness. Another relates to drug abuse. According to the data collated, as many as 15 per cent were seen with apparent substance abuse which could be ink, whitener, boot polish or even drugs. "It is an observation-based enumeration. In most cases, substance abuse is seen as a way to fight cold and hunger. It is in most cases a reaction to fight the existential conditions," George says.

Unlike popular perception, most of the homeless are not runaway kids. "They live on the street with their families or a peer group. Only eight per cent live by themselves, an indicator that the children and their families in most cases are pushed to living in inhuman conditions on the street," Raghavan says.

Here too, the ratio of girls and boys is skewed. The percentage of girls is almost 50 less than that of boys. And it grows steeper as the kids grow. "That could be attributed to child marriage. Most girl children are married off at tender ages of 10 and 12. Human trafficking could be another reason for this. Lack of security pushes the families to send their daughters back to their native places. Safety is the primary concern," he adds.

A caste-wise segregation shows that as high as 42 per cent of such children fall under the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and denotified tribes category. This, too, could be an underestimation, owing to the fact that over 41 per cent were clueless about their castes.

Mary points out that most girl children, who are out on their own, also prefer to be seen with a male partner. "That gives them a sense of safety, although it does not necessarily mean they are secure. They are, in fact, exploited more in such relations," says Mary, adding that these cases are regularly brought to the NGO and Juvenile Justice Board's notice.

The report has concentrated only on the street kids living without any shelter on the pavements, scattered around the city. De-notified and notified slums have been left out of the enumeration.

