

# Skolombo: Street Children Menace and the Future of Public Safety in Calabar, Southern Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Street children known in Cross River state as “*skolombo*”, a name that carries with it different derogatory and dangerous meanings have witnessed sustained growth and proliferation for over three decades with attendant threats to personal and public safety. The growth of street children in the city however in recent times is reportedly due to the fact that children continue to be tossed into the streets on a daily basis for reasons such as witchcraft stigmatisation, child dumping, trafficking from neighbouring states and dis-inheritance by families. The futuristic implications of the growing trend of antisocial boys and girls in the Cross River region is the focus of this study. Specifically, this study investigates how the activities of *skolombo* poses a threat to public safety in the state and practical policy actions that could forestall these futuristic possibilities if tackled early on. Engaging mainly secondary sources and desktop review, this paper provides insight into the activities and implications of the activities of these street children in Calabar. Thematic approach was used to relate the findings of the study. Findings showed the various dimensions and implications of street children on Calabar, the capital city of Cross River state both in present and future times especially relating to public safety and security. Hence, this paper recommends a decisive implementation of the various policies and legislations as well as the strengthening of collaborative efforts to rid the city of street children that pose threat to the security of the state through non-coercive approaches.

**Key Words:** Street Children, Skolombo boys, Lacasera girls, Security, Calabar.

## INTRODUCTION

Street children is a phenomenon common in many nations, especially in third world countries but with different nomenclatures (Ogan, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; Edwards, 2019; Davou, Armiya’u, Tungchama and Maigari, 2019). Among the Tanzanians, street children are known as “*watoto wa mitaani*” and “*chokorra*” among the Kenyans while in the DRC they are designated “*moineaux*” or “*sparrows*” (Henshaw & Ekpenyong, 2021). Each of these designation carries with it derogatory and antisocial connotations that make the children so designated perceived as threat to normal social life and living (Ogan, 2021). According to Henshaw & Ekpenyong (2021), street children translates to crackheads and sycophants because of the kind of activities they are socially associated with. The designation “street children” reinforces a negative image that brings disdain from public perception and especially because they are exempted from basic social needs as education, shelter and healthcare in their search for daily subsistence (Ciazela, 2016). The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) provides a three-pronged dimensional categorisation of street children: street family children, children on the street and children of the street (UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF, 2014). According to the Women Aid International on Children of the World Initiative, there were over 100million homeless children in streets across the world as at 2009 (Women Aid International, 2009). Within Africa however, the United Nations Children Fund reported that there were at least 30million children living on the streets (Yoder, Joop, de Jong and Ria, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; Africanews, 2019). The dynamics of these children as designated by UNICEF is such that they either live on their own in streets without parental guidance or they have parents and guardians but choose to live with peers on the streets

by scavenging and engaging other antisocial activities for survival (Davou et al, 2019). Scholars have also noted that these street children are also at the receiving end of social degradation and deprivation such as malnutrition, extreme poverty, health issues, substance abuse, robbery and cult initiation, sexual assault, police violence, physical and sexual abuse by society and especially social rejection (Ogan, 2021; Henshaw & Ekpenyong, 2021; Iheonu & Urama, 2019).

Several studies like that of Jones and Sumner (2010) has shown that Africa generally lacks the relational dimension of child wellbeing that involves engagement between adults and children and children with environment that helps to achieve important goals as love and care. This means there is a socially missing link of network and support systems to promote and protect the growth and development of the child in Africa (Alem & Laha, 2021). The spate of violence and insecurity has also not helped the plight of vulnerable children in the continent as the recurrent conflict has forced many children to take to the streets for survival (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). This is reflected in a UNICEF study that discovered that 62% of children in the streets in Cairo and Alexandria (Egypt) left their homes and families due to parental neglect, lack of supervision and affection (UNICEF, 2000). A more recent study by UNICEF discovered that a significant percentage of street children in Africa were either runaways – children that ran away from their families and homes – or homeless – that is children that live on the streets without families. Even among these population, abuses were also discovered to constitute 82% of the reasons why runaways and homeless children stay on the streets.

Street children has both social, political, economic and cultural dimensions to it especially in Africa and specifically in Nigeria. Socially in Nigeria and the African continent, they are viewed as street touts and designated dangerous breeds to be avoided. It is not uncommon to see security agencies either targeting or manhandling these children for crimes perceived or actually committed by them (Ogunkan & Adeboyejo, 2021). Contrary to the regulations and recommendations of the United Nations Children Welfare policies, street children are still subjected to various violence and nonviolent structural and physical discrimination (United Nations, 2021). As Hassen (2019) puts it, this tendency to mete discipline to street children is not out of place because it is necessitated by the criminal actions and tendencies of these children. Politically, street children tend to undermine the urban and mega status of cities and urban centres hence the tendency of governments at all levels to rid urban centres of street children (Okoli, 2020). This intervention is however not borne out of the desire to help the plight of homeless children than it is the desire to maintain an aesthetical outlook of capital cities and centres (Odey, 2016; Isine, 2016). Economically, street children present a very cheap source of labour to entrepreneur and business people who would otherwise have to spend relatively higher to acquire commensurate labour for their businesses (Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021). But for homeless children scavenging for food and daily survival, any form of remuneration is better than nothing and this attracts them to entrepreneurs especially in industrialised locations (Uduigwomen, 2019).

Each of the dimensions of street children menace outlined above does not however take into consideration the chief fact that children are first and foremost minors requiring nurturing and guidance. Instead, all sectors of society tend to securitise them from very early and take advantage of the caption or designation given to them for their own reasons. This is however only one aspect of the street children menace. Another very vital concern which this paper basically argues from is the prospect of street children in African societies. While it is a given that street children in whatever form may constitute nuisance to social order and expectations, the future implications of this systematic neglect is not often considered in approaching the subject. For instance, the *almajiri* phenomenon in northern Nigeria where minors under the guidance and instructions of a religious leader, *alhaji* or *imam*, are compelled to engage begging for alms in streets on a regular basis for survival are activities whose implications are not thoroughly thought through (Zakir, Abubakar, Lawal, Imrana, et al, 2014). Findings from several researchers on the rise and spread of insurgency and religious uprising in the northern region has shown that many of the proponents and foot soldiers of these religious militants are children and young persons who fit into the class of street children or children on the street (Ziolkovska, 2021). In other words, children and young persons that were not subjected to thorough education and family system easily grow up to become threats to their immediate society. This is however not taken into consideration by many stakeholders in dealing with the problem of street children. As Alaye (2021) puts it, there tends to be a political approach to addressing this menace than altruistic, in other words, street children menace is only attended to by politicians to score cheap

political points against oppositions. The human face of children forced to leave home because of parental neglect and other forms of maltreatment by family members are excluded in these considerations.

In Nigeria, there is a general lack of data on the exact number of street children in the country even though there is general acknowledgement of the phenomenon in every state (Ogan, 2021; Ciazela, 2016; Secker, 2012). In southern Nigeria, these children are given nomenclatures as “area boys”, and “area girls” to connote their residence in the streets. Calabar, the capital city of Cross River state in the southernmost part of Nigeria designates street children as “*skolombo*”, a name that carries with it different derogatory and dangerous meanings. On the origin of the concept of *skolombo*, Arikpo (cited in WTP, 2019) noted that it began immediately after the civil war in 1966 when many families were displaced and were compelled to live on the streets with their children (WTP, 2019). Following the displacement and even after the civil war, children reportedly stayed on in the streets for up to a decade after the war and even current reports showed that there were children in the streets of Calabar who have stayed for over a decade in the streets with no qualitative intervention by the state government (Okam, 2019). The growth of street children in the city however in recent times is reportedly due to the fact that children continue to be tossed into the streets on a daily basis for reasons such as witchcraft stigmatisation, child dumping, trafficking from neighbouring states and dis-inheritance by families (Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021; WTP, 2019; Davou et al, 2019; Ciazela, 2016; UNICEF, 2014). Reports have also shown that there is an increasing rise in the spate and phenomenon of *skolombo* boys and girls in the city although no tangible statistics is provided by the state or federal government. The futuristic implications of the growing trend of antisocial boys and girls in the Cross River region is thus the focus of this study. Specifically, this study investigates how the activities of *skolombo* poses a threat to public safety in the state and practical policy actions that could forestall these futuristic possibilities if tackled early on.

## Research Question

The main research question for this study is, what are the implications *skolombo* activities on the future and public safety of Calabar, southern Nigeria? The specific research questions are;

- i. What are the activities of *skolombo* in Calabar?
- ii. How do these activities affect the future and public safety of Calabar?
- iii. How can these implications be curtailed?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Street Children – Conceptual Clarification

Three general characteristics are used to define street children according to the United Nations Children Fund and this forms the basic conceptual foundation of application world-over: children on the street, children at risk and children of the street (UNICEF, 2019). According to several scholars, the common characteristics of these different categories is that they are either abandoned in the streets or left to fend for themselves from the street (Ogan, 2021; Davou et al, 2019). On the distinctions of the three categories however, children on the street refers to those children who work on the street for survival even when they have their families and homes that they return at night. They spend the day on the streets seeking various means of survival and subsistence (Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021). The major motivation for this category of street children is the financial or economic remuneration they get from the streets due to the inability of their parents/guardians to fend for them and households (Parveen, 2014). According to the International Labour Organisation, children on the streets globally contribute about 30% to overall household income and this category of street children also represent the largest of the three categories that comprises street children (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015; Owoaje et al, 2009). The children at risk is the next category that comprise the street children compact and this refers to the urban poor children that roam the streets and form what is regarded as street children (Ogan, 2021; Khwairakpam & Sukhminder, 2014). Unlike the first category of children however, these children are from poor families and majorly roaming streets of urban towns and cities which makes them a population at risk as they are under no parental supervision or guidance (Davou et al, 2019; Lewis, 2001; Ebigo, 1996). The last category according to the conceptualisation

of the UNICEF is the children of the street which comprises a more diversified and dynamic set of children that are under no tutelage or care of parents, abandoned children, abandoned children, runaways and orphaned children with no adequate shelter or refuge along the streets (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). The general position amongst scholars is that although distinctive, these three categories are not clearly defined and distinct in reality so that there is not clear way to distinguish between them in social interactions hence the lines are blurred (Owoaje et al, 2009).

The point however as noted by scholars is that irrespective of their categories, unguarded children on the street are referred to as street children and children at risk because of the vulnerabilities they encounter without option for parental intervention (Davou et al, 2019; Bhukuth & Ballet, 2015). Street children demographically refer to persons under the age of 18years who have adopted the streets as their homes (Ogan, 2021; Davou et al, 2019; Ahmed, 2018). Hence rather than consider three categories of street children as outlined by some scholars, Ahmed (2018) and Oyewale (2018) would rather argue that street children refer to one vulnerable class of children. This is because according to the stipulations of the United Nations and the international community, persons below 18years of age are supposed to be under the care and tutelage of guardians (Parveen, 2014). A report indicates however that there are about 150million of such persons under the age of 18years remains at the fore of economic labour with or without the care of a family or shelter (Alem & Laha, 2021). While it is generally agreed that street children are those without shelter, scholars like Wargan and Dershem (2009) would caution that the class of children with known dependents and guardians do not necessarily fall into the category of street children as they have their shelters at night not in the streets. Street children on the other hand are generally those who make the street their abode, live in it and are summarily homeless with no place to go to at night but some makeshift shelter in the streets which makes them vulnerable (Hassan, 2019; Waziri & Fundi, 2019, Ahmed, 2018). The core however according to Alem and Laha (2021) is that irrespective of shelter at night residence, street children basically make their living from the street and engages the street for either economic, domestic or shelter purposes irrespective of whether or not they have a home to return to. This distinction is important because as scholars consider it, they require different interventions to handle: while children on the street may require empowering parents and guardians to prevent child labour, children of the street may require adoption and placement in shelter and social welfare programmes (Demlavali, 2021; Hassen, 2019).

According to a study in Georgia on street children, it was discovered although society gave the tag of “street children” to homeless children usually between 8 and 17years, the children preferred to be regarded as “just kids” and ‘cool kids”. This was explained to be as a result of derogatory tone and antisocial aura that comes with it (Wargan & Dershem, 2009). According to Parveen (2014:78), street children “is any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland etc. has become her or his habitual abode and /or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults”. According to this conceptualisation, the main defining factor of street children is the lack of guardian or responsible adult to provide the necessary supervision and protection for the child (Hassen, 2019; Dutta, 2018). As Dutta (2018) considers it, street children are subjected to the challenge of surviving on the street for socioeconomic and sociocultural reasons along with the suffering, hardship and rejection that comes from living alone on the street. Bhukuth and Ballet (2015) recognises another core aspect of street children which is the fact that they tend to have a closed community of peers that easily results to gangs and cult groups when they come of age which presents a greater security risk and threat to their immediate environment. Irrespective of the homes they come from, this alignment and affiliation with peers on the street supersedes all other connections which makes it very potent as a social cult (Ahmed, 2018).

Summarily, the general conceptualisation of street children has to do with children who for any reason has been and continues to depend on the street for survival, shelter and economic gains with no supervision from guardians or parents. Furthermore, there is a general consensus that the number of street children are increasing by the day in urban centres due to inefficient policies to tackle and eliminate the phenomenon.

### **Child Rights and Protection Policies**

The theme of children’s right as part of human rights tend to be undermined in many circle evident in the subjugation and undignified experiences children are subjected to globally especially in growing and developing countries (Singh & Bharti, 2021; Lundy, 2020). Basically, children come under the age bracket of 0-18years

under the tutelage and guidance of parents and guardians (Lundy, 2020; Brown, 2016; Hanson & Ruggiero, 2013). While several international documents on the rights of the child now exist, scholars like Brown (2016) recognise the fact that children's rights are not explicitly documented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which is the oldest document on the rights humans generally. He argued further that such a systematic neglect not only permeated societies but summarily undermines the rights and privileges of children until the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) (Brown, 2016). Through the CRC, the United Nations for the first time acknowledged the fact that children possessed innate rights equal to those of adults such as rights to health, right to education, right to protection and right to equal opportunity (Singh & Bharti, 2021; Brown, 2016; Hanson & Ruggiero, 2013). Article 25 of the UDHR however contained provisions for the standard of living which prescribes that children are entitled to special care and assistance and article 26 that relates that children be provided with education (Hanson & Ruggiero, 2013). Similarly, article 16 subsection 1 of the UDHR provides for the responsibility of men and women to form a family unit and take responsibility for the children that comes through the family (Brown, 2016). The implication of this is that the family and not necessarily the government is saddled with the first responsibility of protecting the child and ensuring its safety from harm (Hanson & Ruggiero, 2013). In communal-oriented societies such as Africa and Asia however, this duty extends beyond the homefront to include the extended family and immediate society although not constitutionally and explicitly stated (Singh & Bharti, 2021; Lundy, 2020; Brown, 2016; Battarbee et al, 2009).

While the CRC and other similar international documents protecting the rights of the child exists, reports show that there continues to be a substantial amount of enslaved children across the world with a significant of this population in West Africa (Brown, 2016; World Bank, n.d). The Global Survey Index reported that as at 2016 there was an estimated 8.7 million children in slavery globally which is prohibited by Article 4 of the UDHR which provides that "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Brown, 2016:42). The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) also reported that the number of child slavery in African increased to 1.4million in 2018 including those trafficked across the continent (EASO, 2021). Sadly, the majority of these children are trafficked for the purpose of domestic helps or labourers in farms and urban markets (EASO, 2021). As Singh and Bharti (2021) considers it, the issue of children rights can be perceived as the human rights of children which places specific attention on the protection and care accorded young peoples, their rights to association with their biological parents and families, right to formation of human identity, rights to basic need for food, rights to a universal state-paid education, rights to healthcare as well as rights to criminal laws appropriate for the age and development of children. There is however a distinction between child rights policies and allowing children the rights for independent action. While one focuses on ensuring that children are essentially free from physical, mental and emotional abuse, the other is still a subject of debate among scholars and policymakers (Singh & Bharti, 2021; Lundy, 2020; Davou et al, 2019).

Singh and Bharti (2021) however provides a set of defining standards to understand child rights and protection policies:

- i. Child rights policies must recognise the fundamental guarantee accorded to all human beings and children such as the right to life, the non-discrimination principle, the right to dignity through the protection of physical and mental integrity (protection against slavery, torture and bad treatments, etc.).
- ii. Recognise the civil and political rights of humans and also children such as the right to identity, the right to nationality etc.
- iii. Acknowledges the economic, social and cultural rights of humans and children such as the right to education, the right to a decent standard of living and the right to health etc.
- iv. The policy must emphasise individual rights of children such as the right to live with parents, the right to education, the right to benefit from protection. And
- v. Expresses children's collective rights such as rights of refugee and disabled children, of minority children or from autochthonous groups.

All of these rights are reflected in the Convention on the Rights of a Child. Nigeria's Child Rights Act 2003 represent the principle document for the protection of children in the country because it outlines the rights of children (FGN, 2003). The document relates the various privileges and rights of the child in Nigeria, prohibits child labour, contains the protection duty of families and the society and also provides penalties for violating the rights and privileges of children in Nigeria. Although the various states in Nigeria also have their individual policies on the rights and privileges of children, to further entrench the implementation of the CRC, the CRA serves as the chief document for actualising this. The several policies notwithstanding, the implementation of child rights acts across the federation especially at the local and rural levels continues to be a subject of debates due to the alarming rates of child labour, child slaver and other non-dignifying activities that children are subjected to across the country (Battarbee et al, 2009). There is the general argument among scholars however that child labour continues to increase in the country as a result of the lack of efficient government institutions and offices to tackle and eliminate this menace (Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021; Ogan, 2021; Davou et al, 2019). Aside this, there is also the failure of family units to ensure the protection of the children within their sphere which leads to children running away from their homes in search of protection in the streets (Edwards, 2019).

### **Factors Promoting Street Children Menace in Nigeria**

The factors recognised by scholars as aiding the growth of street children menace in the country range from recent occurrences to endemic issues that bother on the nation's economy (Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021). Ogan (2021) notes that amongst other issues, the failure of the government to implement necessary public policies is a major contributing factor to the proliferation of street children in the country. He argues further that while the menace continues in society, the lack of capacity of government institutions and organs to implement the various national and international conventions on the protection of child rights is a major factor contributing to the proliferation of street children in the country (Ogan, 2021). Scholars who hold this view reason that the failure of families and family unit to prevent the occurrence of street children in cities across the country gives the government ample reason to establish social institutions and welfare programmes to eliminate these menaces from streets across the country (Ogan, 2021; Edwards, 2019; Davou et al, 2019; Alawiye-Adams & Babatunde, 2013). Such interventions according to Owolabi (2017) is essentially for the purpose of national and human security because while street children may not be the responsibility of anybody, they present security risk nonetheless to society at large. Ogunkan and Adeboyejo (2021) observed that whether as a result of lack of funds, political will or poor policies, street children phenomenon has continued to experience increasing proportions especially in the southern part of the country. The phenomenon of demographic explosion, drought/desertification, urban migration and congestion, economic recession, increasing unemployment, increasing poverty rate and escalating insecurity and violence are also active forces driving street children increase in the nation (Ogan, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; Alawiye-Adams & Babatunde, 2013).

For Alawiye-Adams and Babatunde (2013), street children have become prominent in recent times due to the interplay of factors such as industrialisation, migration from rural to urban areas, poverty, lack of opportunities for education, broken families, cruelty, neglect and natural calamities. Each of these menaces lead to significant number of children running away from homes or resulting in them fending for themselves (Battarbee et al, 2009). For Swift (1989 cited in Aransiola, 2006), street children are essentially the victims of economic violence. Among the several causes of street children, urban poverty ranks high before aberrant families – abandonment, abuse or neglect. Then there is also the place of modernisation where street culture is gradually taking centre stage amongst many urban society (Ogan, 2021; Friberg & Martinsson, 2017; Sanou, 2017). Pierre (2018) reasons that for many children, the psychological state of the child, the family of the child, the environment and perception of life on the streets a child constantly interacts with and the extent of street children culture a child is exposed to determines the adoption of street children culture. In Nigeria, this is particularly palpable because abusive domestic environment and factors expose children to comparative attractive and better living conditions on the street. The exposure of children to the freedom of roaming streets unmonitored, mixing with gangs, groups and peers overwhelms them to move camps (Davou et al, 2019; Alawiye-Adams & Babatunde, 2013; Omiyinka, 2012). Omiyinka (2012) reasons that this is mostly possible and the case in homes that lack a father-figure or male authority to oversee and provide authoritative direction for the home. Children also run away from homes that possess less or no basic living amenities and facilities like running water, toilet facilities, and have unemployed parenthood, illiteracy and high levels of violence (Omiyinka, 2012).

Ahmed (2018) in his study noted that some children left their homes as a result of abuse and domestic disharmony from their parents to them as well as the exhibition of unwelcome attitudes from parents to children. This feeling increased the tendency of independence and desire to be accepted in children in places outside the home front. Urbanisation and peer pressure are also related by Alem and Laha (2021) as factors facilitating the spread of street children in Nigeria and other African countries because massive poverty and deprivations in rural areas motivate children to migrate in companies to urban in search of better living conditions. Pressure contributes to this as children are compelled by their peers to leave their poor parents and environment to search for better economic options in urban centres (Ogan, 2021; Hassen, 2019). The massive child labour demography in Nigeria are products of the massive influx of poor and neglected children from poor areas to urban centres in search of economic opportunities (Aransiola, 2006). Other reasons related by scholars are lack of protection from social and government institutions which make children become victims of abuse by the police, relevant authorities and individuals who are supposed to protect them (Hassen, 2019; Parveen, 2014). For females, Aransiola (2006) noted that common reasons why they leave home for the streets are physical, emotion and sexual abuse inflicted by parents, step-parents and guardians. Alianza (cited in Aransiola, 2006) called this process “family disintegration”. Urban poverty also compels children to take to street life especially with the unplanned and unregulated rapid urbanisation in Nigeria which broadens the gap between the wealthy and poor (Ogan, 2021; Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021; UNICEF, 2019)

Summarily, the factors aiding the spread of street children in Nigeria are summed under ten (10) categories, namely;

- a. Socio-structural factors
- b. Economic factors
- c. Access to quality education
- d. Insecurity and civil unrest
- e. Neglect and abandonment of children
- f. Cruelty and abuse by guardians
- g. Family disintegration
- h. Peer group influence
- i. Influence of digital and social media
- j. Cultural practices

In essence, addressing the street child menace in Nigeria must necessarily deal with socio-cultural, economic, security, domestic and political factors that underlay it. More so, addressing street child phenomenon must take into cognisance the major goal of protecting the rights and privileges of minors as revealed in the above review. The lack of this perspective generates both present and

## METHODOLOGY

This study engaged the qualitative approach and adopted secondary sources to critically evaluate the menace of street children otherwise known as *skolombo* in Calabar, Cross River State. Data was retrieved from extant studies on the menace and the implications on the state and the region at large. The findings were analysed through desk review and thematic analysis.

## RESULTS

The findings from the study are discussed under three themes in line with the research questions and findings:

## RQ 1: Activities of *Skolombo* in Calabar

*Skolombo* boys in Calabar refer to the gang of street boys who have taken to a life of crime and violence after years of living in the streets (Partnerships Initiative in the Niger Delta, 2017; Isine, 2016; Odey, 2016). These are basically children under 18 years led by the oldest teenager in the group and move around with local weapons as guns, knives, machetes and other crude weapons they use on unsuspecting victims in the Calabar metropolis (PIND, 2017; Esuabana, 2016). The activities of these boys have been traceable to incidents of kidnaps, rape, cult clashes and political violence in the state since 2013 (Okoli, 2020; PIND, 2017). According to reports by the Partnerships Initiative in the Niger Delta (2017), the street children formed these gangs in 2013 when they started banding together as gangs and cults to get at each other violently. These gangs were the results of rival cult wars which spilled from campus-cults into streets in the metropolis and began establishing wings and chapters as extension of campus confraternities (Alaye, 2021; Okam, 2019). These street wings mostly comprised of street children which served as foot soldiers for existing cult groups battling for territorial relevance and expansion (Okoli, 2020). The major characteristic of these boys were the use of force to dispossess people of their wares and possessions which earned them the local slang “obtain by force” or “skolombo boys” alternatively (PIND, 2017). The activities of these boys across streets in Calabar metropolis were so prominent that security reports indicated that they constituted the major culprits of electoral and political violence during the 2015 General Elections in the state (Okoli, 2020; PIND, 2017). From engaging inter-rivalry amongst themselves, these boys have extended their discontent and violence to residents of the city who they partly blame for their plight.

The *Skolombo* phenomenon attracted more children to the streets who sought a way to possess some sough of power over their unaffectionate relatives and rival friends since it guaranteed a gateway to the cult membership (Okam, 2019). According to findings by PIND (2017), fraternities such as Maphites, Vikings, and Black Axe established street wings for junior members comprising mostly teenage street children with the appellation *Junior Vikings*, *Junior Black Axe*, *Blacksins*, *Skyloo* among others. Further security reports indicated that these street cults recruited more children from the streets in the build-up to the elections to intimidate opponents of political patrons and also engaged in political violence to disrupt electoral processes that did not favour their patrons (Alaye, 2021; Okoli, 2020; Okam, 2019). As a result, these *skolombo* boys have grown to become societal nuisance and threats to public security in the state with their vulnerability to being recruited by fraternities and politicians. In the aftermath of the 2015 general elections when weapons were not retrieved from these boys, reports show that they became heavily involved in other criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, drug abuse, and sexual violence (Okoli, 2020; Okam, 2019). The female counterparts of these *skolombo* boys are the *Lacasera Girls* which is named after a popular beverage drink in the city. While the boys constitute armed threats and concerns to the security of the city, these girls also products of street children are prostitute who are believed to provide sexual gratification at the cost of a bottle of *Lacasera* drink (Alaye, 2021; PIND, 2017). A substantial amount of these girls are also involved in drug abuse and are highly sought by pimps, owners of brothels, child traffickers and drug dealers in the city (Okoli, 2020; PIND, 2017). Although some of these children have been raped by their male counterparts and older males who attack them during their patrols at night, they continue to indicate the failure of homes and public institutions to cater for young teenage boys and girls in the state (PIND, 2017). These girls aside being vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases as HIV/AIDs, they also engage in baby factory dealings by selling babies from unwanted or intentional pregnancies for money (PIND, 2017). Some others deliberately engage in child trafficking businesses due to desperation to make financial gains and fall victims of unsuspecting human and child traffickers with the promise of better living experience. In his study on the activities of *skolombo* boys and *Lacasera* girls in Calabar, Okam (2019) relates that;

*The Cross River State capital (Calabar) has been faced with rising insecurity as a result of violence and criminality attributed to street children locally called “Skolombo Boys” and “Lacasera Girls”. These homeless children beg for alms and scavenge for recyclable materials on the street and have become a problem to residents of the state. From roaming the street for survival in bands, some have formed into criminal gangs. They have been associated with incidents of robbery, kidnapping, rape, pick-pocketing and drug abuse (Okam, 2019:77)*

These homeless children beg for alms and scavenge for recyclable materials on the street and have become a problem to residents of the state. From roaming the street for survival in bands, some have formed into criminal gangs. They have been associated with incidents of robbery, kidnapping, rape, pick-pocketing, and drug abuse. All of these activities according to findings from the study have been consistently growing in the metropolis over the last decade constituting a major security concern to public safety and social order especially with the creation of street wings of cult groups in the metropolis. The implications of these concerns to the future and public safety of the metropolis is discussed in the next section.

## **RQ 2: Implications of *Skolombo* Activities on the Future and Public Safety of Calabar**

From the findings of the study, *skolombo boys* presents an existential threat to the study area that if left unabated carries several security and human implications. Discussions in this section will be in two forms – present and future. Presently, there is the growing concern of the increasing rate and activities of these boys in the metropolis forcefully robbing people of their possessions (Okoli, 2020; Okam, 2019; PIND, 2017). This presents a security concern that security agencies and local vigilantes have to grapple with especially because of the fact that many of these children have been armed and also subjected to drug abuse (Odey, 2016). Publicly, *skolombo boys* are not accepted in the wider society due to the negative perception of them by residents. From this simple neglect, they have grown to become stigmatised by the larger society which further pitches them against the larger society (Isine, 2016). With growing discontent and grievance against their immediate families, parents, and communities for neglecting them, it becomes relatively easy for these boys and girls to join gangs and resort to criminality and violence against their immediate society (Alaye, 2021; Esuabana, 2016). Also, as the PIND (2017) report rightly indicates, negative perception and attitude towards these boys by the general public further drives them towards anti-social violent and criminal behaviours. This is compounded by the fact that they are frequently detained and tortured by security agencies for minor offenses as homelessness, loitering or petty theft without consideration for their minority status (Okoli, 2020; PIND, 2017). Aside the current public security concerns however, there is also the concern for the future and sustainability of peace in the state with proliferation of street children and criminal gangs (Okoli, 2020). Mentally, many of these children may grow up to become psychologically unstable adults without adequate mental healthcare and therapy due to the frequency of abuse and harassment faced from security agencies (PIND, 2017). Especially for those who have engaged criminalities due to circumstances beyond their control, the long-term effects on their psyche are not properly put into perspective by policymakers and residents of the city. As such, the nearest future and public safety may be significantly threatened by a generation of unstable adults seeking revenge on a society that neglected them and refused to provide the necessary support they required to be qualitative individuals. Like the almajiri case in northern Nigeria where unsuspecting children turned out to be foot soldiers for insurgent and extremist religious groups (Ogan, 2021; Okam, 2019), the *skolombo* phenomenon may eventually turn out negatively for the state at large. Already, findings show that they constitute threats to the peace and security of the state following their fraternity-related criminal activities (Alaye, 2021). Without formal education or socialisation of families, the future of these children in an evolving digital society looks bleak and may be summarily cut off from the economic opportunities of the nearest future which further puts the city at risk. Then as the PIND (2017) report indicates, there is a possibility of recycling the culture of violence and criminality to other children when these boys and girls become adults without due care and interventions. In other words, children and young persons in the nearest future in the city are at risk of being victimised and subjected to vengeful outbursts from today's street children who may make it into adulthood.

Another implication of the activities of these street boys to the city is the challenge it poses to public peace, safety and security especially considering the fact that it is one of Africa's choice locations for tourism (Okoli, 2020; Okam, 2019). With the proliferation of these street gangs and violent boys and girls acting as agents and perpetrators of violence to the city, the peace and security index of the city is threatened and may negatively impact her publicity as a peaceful tourist location (Alaye, 2021; Okam, 2019). Already there are reports of *skolombo boys* defacing public centres and monuments in the city as a result of using these centres as shelters during the night (Alaye, 2021; Odey, 2016; Isine, 2016). With such practices unabated, the public safety index of the state is likely to drop which in turn affects the revenue generated from tourism and international events like the Calabar carnival. Furthermore, the encouragement of street children as perpetrators of violence by politicians as indicated in several studies means that in the nearest future, there is likely to be a sustained influx

of the menace because of the backing they receive from politicians and shadow parties (Okoli, 2020; PIND, 2017). Lastly, the city of Calabar may fail to actualise the social and infrastructural development and growth required to make the city a truly global attraction centre with the proliferation of street children posing threats to public gatherings and development.

### **RQ 3: Curtailing *Skolombo* Activities in Calabar**

Findings from the study also relates some recommendation and active steps taken by the Cross River state government to address the phenomenon but with little success. Some of these interventions are the deployment of para-military operations such as *Operation Skolombo*, to eliminate them from the streets of the city (Okam, 2019). Some other interventions include the establishment of welfare programmes to reclaim, rehabilitate and reinstate the street boys into normal social life, and the provision of punitive measures for violator (Esuabana, 2016; Odey, 2016; Isine, 2016). These activities are however viewed distinctly by several scholars and respondents. For instance, providing an overview of government intervention, PIND (2017) report observed the certain civil society organisations have been active in providing welfare assistance to these children, even though it has not been enough to take them out of the streets. The report further noted that the special security task force “Operation Skolombo” initiated by the Cross River State government is not an effective method to curtail the menace of these boys. Instead it breeds distrust and hostility between street children and government agencies which is supposed to provide them with much needed interventions. According to experts and scholars, the best method to adopt in curtailing the activities of these boys are those that holistically addresses the underlying structures and systems that enhance the culture of violence and criminality associated with these children (Okoli, 2020; Okam, 2019; PIND, 2017). And these cannot be addressed separately but holistically hence the first step is for the government of the state to engage meaningful and intentional collaboration with relevant stakeholders in the state to address this menace decisively. Stakeholders such as civil society organisations, nongovernmental organisations, religious organisations, educational institutions, traditional institutions and security agencies are important in this endeavour (PIND, 2017). Through effective and timely collaborations with these stakeholders, the government of the state could develop a comprehensive strategy to understanding the dynamics of street children in the state and a practical intervention programme to address the root cause of these causes.

Findings from the study also relate that while the government are dealing with developing a comprehensive strategy to address this menace, CSOs and NGOs working on providing welfare packages and support services to these children could intensify their efforts (Offiong & Uduigwomen, 2021; Okam, 2019). Intensifying their efforts in this manner means providing more support services in the form of conflict resolution, guidance and counselling, family support programmes, and reorientation to families, parents and street boys and girls (Esuabana, 2016). Such efforts can complement the efforts of the government and also provide practical areas of intervention for the government and other stakeholders in the state.

Then there is the important role of traditional and religious institutions in modifying their methods of addressing street children by branding children as “witches” and “evil” to be abandoned by their families (Alaye, 2021). This is because findings also reveal that a major cause of street children in the state at large and in the city of Calabar has to do with parental neglect following recommendations from religious outfits and traditional figures that certain children were the cause of ill luck and bad omen (Alaye, 2021; Offiong & Uduigwomen, 2021). Hence parents tended to neglect or chase their children away from homes because of perceived harm. Such issues must be decisively addressed by the government such that religious and traditional institutions modify their orientation and change their methods to ensure social order (Okoli, 2020). As the Partnerships Initiative in the Niger Delta (2017) observed in their report, churches and traditional healing homes should be sensitised on the dangers of stigmatising children and the need for ensure that children are protected at all costs. This is because of the influence of religious institutions over residents of the state. Traditionally and culturally, the idea of child labour must also be addressed to curtail the activities of the traffickers and businesses taking advantage of street children as cheap labour.

One of the core approaches to curb the menace of street children in Calabar as observed by several scholars is the need to implement the various child protection rights and policies (Offiong & Uduigwomen, 2021; Okam, 2019). Although the state has adopted the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Nigerian Child Rights Act, findings indicate that there have been no decisive efforts to implement these policies (Alaye, 2021).

At best, efforts have been intermittent and not sustainable because it has not been given the priority required for engaging child protection. And this is important for curbing street children because it is instrumental in providing efficient parental care, maintenance and protection by punishing individuals, group or organisations that engages practices that violate the rights of children in the state.

Establishing a correctional facility and rehabilitation centre in the state to help rehabilitate street children in the state is an important step to curbing the current violent tendency and psychological disorder of *skolombo boys*. Currently, these facilities tend not to exist and even the government department saddled with addressing child welfare and women empowerment are largely underfunded and non-performing (Henshaw & Ekpeyong, 2021; Alaye, 2021). Rehabilitation and correctional services are costly activities that require adequate funding and investment to initiate and sustain but which are currently missing in the state but these are the real needs of these dysfunctional children if they will not turn out to be a threat to public safety and security in the nearest future.

### **Policy Recommendation**

From the findings of the study, the following policy recommendations are made;

1. Establish a correctional and rehabilitation facility in Calabar to address street children.

The current approach of engaging security task force to eliminate street children from the street is counterproductive. It must be understood that these are essentially minors who have had dysfunctional upbringing and are victims of societal neglect hence the best approach is to rehabilitate and correct their mind-set and perspective about life.

2. Establish and Strengthen Public Departments and Offices on Child Rights

There should be a commitment to funding and strengthening of existing government offices on child rights in the state to enhance performance and efficiency. This is important to properly implement and enforce the various provisions and policies on child rights in the state especially as it relates to providing a succour for street children. These offices should also be qualitatively staffed so that they are prepared and equipped to engage innovative steps to addressing and curbing street children from the state.

3. Enforce Task Force Operations in Campuses and their Street Wings in the State

Addressing the violence character of street children must necessarily deal with the root which is campus cultism that reportedly spills into the streets of Calabar. There should be a policy action to direct security task force operations to these campuses. Decisively tackling these fraternities in campuses will summarily cut off their support and sustenance of street gangs and leave *skolombo boys* with no option but to turn away from street violence with no backing from their mother cults.

4. Enforce Social Welfare Programmes and Projects

This can be done by providing scholarship opportunities, accommodations and training programmes to street children and their families to remove them from the street and ensure that they get quality education. This should however be done alongside rehabilitation and correctional services so that these children can effectively take advantage of welfare programmes. In the absence of rehabilitation and correctional services, street children with damaged and dysfunctional psyche will not be able to submit themselves to social welfare programmes and project but may instead damage the whole process. Therefore, as important as social welfare programmes, it should be done side-by-side rehabilitation.

5. Strengthen Family Courts in Calabar

Family courts that handle child related cases in the state should be strengthened to function optimally especially in the areas of strengthening the home-front against child neglect and abandonment. As discovered from the study.

## 6. Fund NGOs

The nongovernmental organisations working to rid the city of street children should be adequately funded and empowered to address these issues more aggressively. Aside financial supports, government offices can also collaborate with these organisations to provide adequate statistics and information for eradicating the menace of street children in the metropolis.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown the various dimensions and implications of street children on Calabar, the capital city of Cross River state both in present and future times especially relating to public safety and security. This paper has also argued for the decisive implementation of the various policies and legislations as well as the strengthening of collaborative efforts to rid the city of street children that pose threat to the security of the state through non-coercive approaches. With the policy recommendations provided in this study, the negative implications of *skolombo boys* outlined in this study would be greatly curtailed by the Cross River State government and other national and international actors.

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