

# Voices of Street Connected Children in Delhi during COVID-19

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The study conducted by a non-governmental organization 'Butterflies' describes the lived experiences of street children during Covid-19 in Delhi. It documents the effects of Covid-19 on their household food security, mental health, and schooling. Data was collected over 11 months through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 56 children. The data revealed that children were affected on a large scale, as families took loans from relatives and friends to buy food. Closure of schools resulted in the interruption of supportive services like mid-day meals, school health care and scholarships for children belonging to the below poverty line category. This pushed large numbers of families into extreme poverty, physical and mental health trauma and a corresponding increase in child labour.

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## INTRODUCTION

The article is based on an analysis of primary data captured over 11 months through grassroots intervention programmes by a non-governmental organization 'Butterflies' with 533 children living on the streets of Delhi during the Covid-19. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 56 children to get an insight into their experiences and feelings on household food security, mental health, and disruption in schooling.

The street connected communities are part of the informal migrant work force that was badly hit during this period. The pandemic unimaginably impacted one and all, but had severe repercussions on the marginalised and vulnerable children. A survey conducted by the Azim Premji University (2020a) on 3,970 urban households, found that the families had less than a week's cash in hand to buy essentials. Sixty-four percent of the casual daily wagers had no Jan Dhan bank account for cash transfers. This was also corroborated with the data gathered in a rapid survey conducted by Butterflies (2020), wherein 70 percent of adults had lost their livelihoods soon after the lockdown in eight slum communities in Delhi. A majority of the families, who are unskilled daily wage earners, mentioned that their savings would not last them for more than a few days. Independent street living working adolescents had also lost their jobs. While a majority of the migrant daily wagers have no school education, the remaining had not completed their primary schooling. Most of them were anxious about getting their jobs back, as they lacked the skills or qualifications to undertake any other jobs or occupations.

We are not literate and don't know any other work than what we have been doing so far (A desperate parent).

The families and children who were part of the interventions and focus group discussions live in one room rented tenements in non-notified or notified slums. A few of the children and their families live either on the pavements or under flyovers or in front of shops in market areas; these also include the independent living adolescents. All the parents are employed in the unorganized sector with no social security benefits and savings. Most of them are unskilled and work as porters, construction labourers, rickshaw pullers, and helpers at shops in wholesale or vegetable markets. Some of them are street hawkers, vendors and scrap pickers.

## **IMPACT ON CHILDREN**

### **Understanding Hunger**

As per the Oxford Dictionary, hunger is defined as ‘a feeling of discomfort or weakness caused by lack of food, coupled with the desire to eat’. This is a very simplistic meaning of hunger, as hunger is a multidimensional concept, which has evolved over time. In the Indian context, hunger is also a potential consequence of food insecurity. In other words, the cause of hunger is not a shortage of food, but rather access to food.

Holben (2005) has enumerated several definitions of hunger from various sources. These definitions fall into four groups: (i) a motivational drive, need, or craving for food; (ii) an uneasy sensation felt when one has not eaten for some time; (iii) discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain caused by a prolonged, involuntary lack of food; and (iv) the prolonged, involuntary lack of food itself.

The first and second groups refer to a natural phenomenon that all humans experience on a regular basis. The fourth is also not an appropriate definition or concept of hunger, because it refers to the problem of food insecurity itself. The third group provides a starting point and can be used as a lens to see hunger. It refers to the consequence of food insecurity that, because of a prolonged, involuntary lack of food due to lack of economic resources, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation (Holben, 2005).

Hunger should not be confused with malnutrition. Hunger can be addressed by providing food, but may not ensure nutritious meals. Malnutrition is being poorly nourished, whether undernourished or obese.

### **Impact of Hunger on Children**

As per the Global Hunger Index 2019, India was ranked at 102 among 117 countries and placed in the ‘serious’ category (von Grebmer and others, 2019). In 2020, India ranked 94 among 107 countries and was still placed in the ‘serious’ hunger category. The COVID-19 pandemic has, however, unimaginably impacted families and communities. The direct impact is seen with the increased number of children living in poverty and hunger. According to United Nations (2020), COVID-19 poses a threat to the futures of 600 million children in South Asia. While 240 million children already live in "multidimensional" poverty, this crisis will push an additional 120 million children from the region into poverty.

In April 2020, at the peak of school closures, 390 million children globally were losing out in school meals, bulk of whom were in India. The closure of schools meant children between the ages of 6 and 14 lost out on mid-day meals (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2020). The hunger situation is best articulated by a child who studies in grade six. He wrote poignantly about his experience of hunger during the lockdown in his notebook. He is from Bihar and resides in the Jama Masjid market area in Delhi. He writes:

After lockdown was announced, gradually everyone around us vanished. We had nothing with us, no food rations, no cash. We did not know what to do. We approached a shopkeeper who is from Bihar and he gave us some ration. We survived on that for few days. Then NGOs such as Butterflies started giving us cooked meals. In our street, we made all children aware of this service and saw to it they got their meal packets. We also kept a few meal packets for our friends. I cannot even imagine what would have happened to us?

During the lockdown, civil society organisations and the state government served cooked meals to the hungry population. However, there was little coordination at the ground level between the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The relief work carried out by the NGOs was better planned, as they were familiar with the communities that required immediate help and even managed to reach out to communities located in far flung areas. The NGOs distributed relief materials including cooked meals and dry rations to individuals and families irrespective of them possessing identification documents like the Aadhar card.

Individuals had to have an Aadhar card or register on an e-portal to access food rations. A large number of families were unable to access free rations due to lack of documentation. Several NGOs including Butterflies enabled a number of families to register on the e-portal to avail rations. This, however, raises a serious question on the lack of data regarding the number of migrant casual daily wagers in the state. Furthermore, the state government and the local administration had not initiated any mechanism to enroll the population without identity documents or register them on the e-portal.

Kamala\*, a 14-year-old girl narrates her experience when her parents had lost their jobs.

There is no money, no food at home and all savings is over. It was terrible to wait for hours at a food distribution center, expecting that somebody would come and distribute food, we felt like beggars.

There was no clear public announcement as to where and when the food would be distributed. Ayesha and her 12-year-old brother Sharif would go out every day to find out the location of food distribution centres in their neighbourhood. Many communities who were not within the radar of the government distribution network did not receive any relief.

Getting food everyday was a challenge. We used to think every day whether we would be able to eat. We used to sleep with a fear whether we would get anything to eat the next morning. This situation remained for some weeks. Looking at the situation, I and my siblings used to think that life is worthless (Anjali).

Interaction with the families revealed that most families cooked only one meal in a day, which was then eaten over two meals. Butterflies received phone calls from police stations in south and south east Delhi for assistance in providing cooked meals and dry rations to several families who were not on the roster of the government relief programme. Butterflies Childline received calls from fifty families for support to place their children (104) in childcare institutions (CCI) between June-July 2020. With no jobs, money or identification documents like Aadhar or ration cards, parents had become desperate and worried about the education and welfare of their children. The details of these families were given to the District Child Protection Unit for family sponsorship support.

The lack of planning and coordination between different departments led to haphazard distribution of free rations, for example, while in some areas families with ration cards received free ration for four months, some others received for only two months and, some for seven months. Those without any documentation were dependent on NGOs for rations and cooked meals. Similarly, the mid-day meals (free rations) were erratically distributed across the state. Some school children were given mid-day meals or free rations for two months, others four months; and in some instances, Rs.78/- per child per month was given in lieu of free rations for three months. The mid-day meals (dry rations) should have been mandatorily provided to the children; as it is a singular most important social protection programme and safety net for children from poor marginalised communities.

What I miss most of not going to school is the mid-day meal, I miss my friends and teachers but most of all the mid-day lunch (12-year-old Ali).

Nutritious food is not a primary concern in a situation of hunger and starvation. While families were struggling to put some food on the table during the pandemic, the female members of the families ate whatever was left. Focus group discussions with the adolescent boys revealed that the boys deliberately ate only half of the food portioned out to them thus ensuring that their sisters and mothers got enough to eat. The impact of the economic crisis disproportionately impacted vulnerable families with adverse health issues including mental health.

### **Impact on Education of Children**

The Delhi Government has a total of 1,227 government and government-aided schools in Delhi, which is 21.30 percent of the total schools (5,760) operational in Delhi (Economic survey of Delhi 2018–19) under the Department of Education. The other major chunk (primary school education) is with Municipal Corporations.

### **Interruption in Schooling**

Closure of schools has adversely impacted the learning capacity of children due to lack of accessibility to remote learning. Butterflies found that each household had only one mobile phone, which is shared by all members of the family, making it extremely difficult for children to follow online learning. Many children did not receive information about the introduction of online classes and their names were not listed in the groups. Surprisingly, the school authorities did not have the mobile numbers of parents in their admission records. In many households, children had to wait for parents to return in the evening for use of the mobiles to complete their worksheets. This meant that children could not attend online interaction classes with teachers nor could they contact them on the phone if they missed logging in at the appointed time.

A 7th grade child mentioned his teacher was very rude and ticked him off saying, “it is not the only work that I have to do”. Some schools allowed children to send recorded queries to the teachers. Children studying in the 9th grade found it difficult to access textbooks, primarily because they did not have the resources to purchase the same. Teachers from Butterflies downloaded the requisite books and shared them online.

School attendance was marked based on children submitting their completed worksheets daily. This created anxiety among children, as they could complete and submit their worksheets late in the evening when parents returned from work and handed them the mobiles. There is no uniform approach or system to provide online teaching in the current situation. Children find it exceedingly difficult to follow lessons online and fear they will fall behind in their studies. The teachers associated with Butterflies helped children with their studies late in the evening, that is, when children had access to the mobile.

During a focus group discussion children stated, “support provided by Bhaiya Didi was really important for us. We could contact them anytime for clarification, help for completing the worksheets on time. It helped us to understand the online lessons.” Children did mention of sensitive schoolteachers who tried to help them understand the lessons, but they were few.

According to a report prepared by the United Nations (2020), more than 30 percent of these students, around 463 million, were unable to access remote learning opportunities. In India it has impacted 247 million children enrolled in upper primary (elementary) and secondary education, besides 28 million who were undergoing pre-school education in anganwadi centers. Only 23.8 percent households in India have access to the internet, and rural areas are far more under-served —

14.9 percent of the households have access to the internet as opposed to 42 percent in urban areas (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019).

A recent field study conducted by the Azim Premji University (2020b) covering 5 states across 26 districts and 1,522 schools states that 60 percent of the respondents (children) could not access online education because of the non-availability of smart phones for dedicated use, difficulties in using the apps and understanding the lessons taught online. Fifty percent of the children were unable to complete assignments, which led to serious gaps in learning. The learning levels of first-generation learners will drop drastically and make it difficult for them to make up this loss. It goes without saying that online learning cannot substitute classroom face to face teaching- learning.

One of the indirect impacts of interruption in schooling would be an increase in child labour. During the last two decades, there had been a reduction in child labour; but COVID-19 may reverse the trend. High increase in poverty and economic distress will result in families resorting to survival coping mechanisms, whereby parents would resort to taking children out of school and putting them to work. Experts believe that many sectors will now be desperate for cheap labour and a reduction of costs. The conditions will be conducive for a spike in child labour. To illustrate this situation, Butterflies CHILDLINE received a complaint that seven children were working in exploitative situations in the south district of Delhi. An investigative visit to the place revealed that the families were migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The parents lived in rented rooms and were unskilled casual workers working at construction sites; one was a rickshaw puller. None of the adults had a regular income, as construction work was stalled. To supplement the meagre family savings and erratic income, children were made to work at various places including a motor mechanic shop, one as a packing assistant in a factory, two as waiters in a roadside eatery and two

girls as domestic helps. The child protection committees that are supposed to be operative in the wards could have identified these families and enabled access to social welfare schemes, child sponsorship, cash transfer, and if they were school going children the mid-day meals either in cash or dry rations. Hence, closure of schools not only impacted the learning levels of children, but also affected allied services like mid-day meals, school health care and scholarship for children belonging to families below poverty line (BPL).

The present crisis will reverse the significant achievements of the last so many years, that is, reduction in dropout rates of children in primary and upper primary level. It is given knowledge that lack of schooling and life skills will deny millions of children opportunities to advance and break the chain of generational illiteracy and poverty and increase the disparity within the society.

### **Impact on Mental Health of Children**

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health has been published extensively by the media internationally, there is a striking lack of evidence-based research. However, it has been widely recognised that the prevalence of mental health issues has increased, especially among the marginalised groups, including children (Dvorsky, Breaux and Becker, 2020; Jepsen and others, 2020). Mental health of children was severely affected and children experienced emotional distress during this period of uncertainty in their lives. The financial situation has worsened the children's emotional health with the loss of parental employment or a reduced income in all the affected countries (Fegert and others, 2020). When working with children in Delhi, Butterflies found that most children were worried about the loss of household income and financial crisis of their families. Parents were stressed, but did not share their concerns with children. Almost all the children mentioned how payment of rent troubled parents a lot, as they were worried about losing their homes. In an interview with 14-year-old Ranjith, he spoke of his deep sense of helplessness "in my heart I have this deep sadness and anger; anger as I feel so helpless that I cannot get a job that will give me a decent wage to help my family out of this financial crisis".

Replacement of school and classroom teaching into online teaching has exposed children and adolescents with conditions for isolation and increased internet use, experiences of acute and chronic stress because of parental anxiety, disruption of daily routines, increased family violence, and home confinement with little or no access to peers, teachers, or physical activity (Brooks, 2020; Kumar, Nayar and Bhat, 2020).

We did not have food. We did not have money too. We were not allowed to move out. We could not have food for some days. The Ramadan started and we could not go out and buy essential items. My father pulls rickshaw. There was no work. My parents had a fight and my mother got injured. She had to be taken to the hospital. We were feeling that we would not be able to survive. We used to pray a lot so that God helps us (13-year-old Manju).

Through the discussions, it was evident that children were worried if they would be able to go back to school and fall behind with their learning. Children missed going to school, meeting friends and relatives. All of them live in small congested spaces, which is stifling. They were restless to go out and play and spend time outside the confines of their one-room living space.

You see our locality is such that usual fights happen every day. There is not a single day when our locality will be calm. So, the home is also full of tensions because of the gaali wali (abuses) one hears in the neighbouring houses in the locality. We face so much of tension, and disturbances that the studies cannot happen sitting here, because of the noise (A14-year-old boy).

Children also spoke about the insecurity of their parents—translating into arguments, physical violence and anger—transferred on to children. Parekh and Dalwai (2020) note that as a result of the psychosocial impact of Covid-19 on children "an ongoing, pervasive sense of loss (of social networks, jobs, financial security and threatened loss of loved ones) experienced by the families poses a significant risk for the adjustment of more than 37 crore children (0–14 years) in India and this has impacted the quality of relationships among parents, children, and siblings". Parekh and Dalwai (2020) also record the impact of COVID-19 on family dynamics as the levels of psychological distress caused by the pandemic impact the

quality of relationships among parents and children. The most common psychosocial and behavioural problems reported among children and adolescents in the pandemic were isolation, lack of attention by the parents, frustrations, and fear of asking questions about when the situation will change for the better.

Children called the Butterflies CHILDLINE south district office and reported about bullying from neighbourhood acquaintances, toxic comments posted on WhatsApp by classmates.

I was wondering how somebody knew my number. I had not shared my number to anybody but there were a lot of messages. The messages were unpleasant, and I was scared to share with my parents also. Sometimes, I was asked to share my photo. A boy called and told me that he took my photo from my WhatsApp and would share it in the net. I blocked his number, but he keeps calling from other numbers. I told my father and Bhaiya (social case worker) about it (Rajni).

The ramifications of children using internet for long periods, unsupervised and without adult guidance, has resulted in an increased number of children getting trapped into the dark websites and chat rooms resulting in online sexual abuse of children.

exposes children to various forms of abuses at times (Brooks and others, 2020). A report by Europol (2020) says that children's vulnerability to online offenders, attempted fraud, and access to sexually inappropriate content are subjected to be amplified during the time of the pandemic due to the increased screen time and lack of parental supervision. Raised agitation, aggression, anxiety, depression, and sadness, and worsened school performances are the reported mental issues among children worldwide (Qiu and others, 2020).

Although during the COVID period, most counselling services were conducted through tele-counselling, children found it extremely difficult to access a mobile phone for a dedicated period. Additionally, they did not have a private space to attend a session nor were they able to communicate their emotional distress through the phone, especially when there was no privacy. Furthermore, a child needs the physical presence of a person (counsellor/caseworker) to establish comfort levels and as a reassurance that the adult is listening and taking cognisance of what they are communicating. Observation of the body language of the child will give an insight to the therapist of the emotional status of the child. However, Butterflies continued to have face to face sessions with children who required therapy, as tele-counselling was not an option.

The unprecedented situation due to COVID-19 impacted children and adolescents in several ways, as to how they learn, play, behave, interact, and deal with situations (Shah and others, 2020). Although the symptomatic manifestation of the pandemic is mild in children, unprecedented disruption has happened in their daily routines, from school closure, lack of social activities and less engagement with friends, and experiences of increased family stress and different forms of violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

COVID-19 disaster was a health and economic disaster that reduced a significant percentage of population to extreme poverty and physical and mental health trauma. It has adversely impacted the lives of children and families. There are a number of studies that have established that the family is the most crucial social unit which needs strengthening, if children must grow up to be emotionally resilient, self-confident, make informed choices and have the ability to resolve conflicts. Therefore, the focus should be on how to support the family. Economic distress and lack of social protection are key factors that push families to the brink of collapse. It must be mentioned that poverty must be seen through the lens of inequities, the existence of inherent disparities in the society that need to be addressed, if children are to enjoy a caring, protective, free childhood.

The voices of children are best summed up in a song written by a 9th grade child, who lives near Okhla Mandi, South Delhi:

ना हाथ मिलाना, ना बाहर जाना, घर में ही पड़े हैं, बंद पैसा आना, रोते दिल की यही है दास्तान,

Corona, Corona, ओ Corona, हमको अब परेशान मत करो ना.

हम सब की है ये सारी मेहेरबानी, खांसी से भी दुनिया डर रही है सारी,

Sanitiser की shortage है भारी, ना mask अब बचे हैं, मेडिकल सभी हैं खाली.

स्कूल पे है ताला, ना ऑफिस जाना, हम आलसियों को मिल चुका है बहाना,

और noodles भी दूर है ना,

Corona, Corona, ओ Corona, हमको अब परेशान मत करो ना,

Corona, Corona, ओ Corona.

अब कहाँ वो सारे हिंदू और मुसलमान, जब जान पे आयी तो डर रहा हर इंसान,

देख लो और कुछ तो समझो ना,

Corona, Corona, ओ Corona, हमको अब परेशान मत करो ना.

*No handshakes, no outside going, only at home, no money coming,  
Crying heart has this story, Corona, Corona, oh Corona, do not trouble us more now.*

*This is only all our making, even world is scared of cough too, There is heavy shortage of sanitizer,  
even masks are not there,*

*even medical stores are empty, Schools are locked and no office going, We lazy people have got one  
excuse, even noodles are far now, Corona, Corona, Oh Corona, do not trouble us more now.  
Corona, Corona, Oh Corona.*

*Where are now Hindu and Musalmaan, when it came about our own life, Every individual is scared,  
look for something else, understand,  
Corona, Corona, Oh Corona.*

## NOTES

\*The names of children and parents have been changed to keep their identity confidential.

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