

# Street Children in Vietnam

Interactions of Old and New Causes in a Growing Economy

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## Abstract

The problem of street children in Vietnam, a country rapidly growing and integrating with the world, arises from the interaction of traditional causes such as the loss or divorce of parents and new causes such as economic incentive. This paper reviews the existing studies for the definition and classification of street children. Changing conditions are compared across time and between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. We then propose a new typology of street children based on *causes* and *situations*. Causes are classified into *broken family*, *mindset problem*, and *economic migration*. Situations are divided into *current protection* and *future investment*. It is shown that the broken family group is most difficult to assist while the economic migration group often shows strong desire for study and better life. However, their aspiration is frequently interrupted by various setbacks. Since street children are not a homogenous group, intervention must also be diversified according to the needs of each type of children.

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We are aware that this paper still has limitations. The responsibility for any remaining errors rests solely with the two authors. At the same time, we would be very happy to receive any comments or suggestions from the readers of this paper.

## 1. Introduction

The problem of street children is one of the most pressing social problems in Vietnam in general and in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in particular. Recently the sight of children selling chewing gum in restaurants or shining shoes in street corners has become familiar. People sometimes call them roaming kids or “dust of life.” However, the dynamic mechanism that prompts these children to drop out of school and go selling in the street is yet to be analyzed deeply or comprehensively. Such causes as dire poverty and parents’ divorce may be common to the street children problem in all developing countries, but other causes may be unique to Hanoi and HCMC, the two cities experiencing an enormous social and economic transformation.

Children end up on the street for a variety of reasons. For some, the street is an escape from broken families or domestic violence. For others, street life is a means of supplementing family income, passing time and even having fun. In addition, the breakdown of traditional family values, education zeal and community structure leaves a large number of children without necessary care and support for their sound growth and development.

Children who work or live on streets do not have the full knowledge of their rights and are often unaware of various risks in unguided urban life. Many of them are under the stress of day-to-day living. Some use alcohol or illegal drugs to relieve the stress and to forget painful experiences. Others are trained to become professional beggars. Still others commit crimes individually or join anti-social gangs. Disabled children may be sold to strangers who force them to beg on streets. Girls seem to be in particular danger as the target of sexual assault and exploitation.

Thanks to *doi moi* policy, the people’s average living standard has improved dramatically since the late 1980s. National statistics show that GDP per capita rose from 156 USD in 1992 to 482 USD in 2002 (GSO 2004). In 1993, 58% of the population was under the poverty line<sup>1</sup> but the ratio fell to 37.4% in 1998 and to 28.9% in 2002 (GSO 1999, 2004). With these achievements, Vietnam is one of the best performers among the low income countries. Despite this, fast growth and global integration have also intensified certain traditional social problems and created new ones. As the average income rose, some problems get much worse and more visible, and the problem of street children is one of them<sup>2</sup>.

Vibrant cities like Hanoi and HCMC generate new opportunities and demands for jobs like house cleaning, shoe shining, and selling petty goods to residents and foreign tourists which urban people are unwilling to perform. Instead, the expectation of cash income encourages rural labor to migrate to the city and supply such services. Working on the street may be more dangerous and tiresome than tilling paddy fields in the countryside,

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<sup>1</sup> The poverty line used here is 1USD/person/day.

<sup>2</sup> Other problems that may intensify with economic development include corruption, environmental destruction, land bubble, the rise of materialism, and the decline of cultural and spiritual values.

but it is more profitable. Rural people come to cities even though they have to live separately from their families and familiar landscape. In addition, the excitement of urban life as well as opportunities for education, training and jobs attract young rural people like a magnet. These are the “pulling” forces of rural-urban migration.

With the rapid growth of the national economy, rural life in Vietnam has also changed substantially, sometimes for the better but other times for the worse. The material conditions in villages have improved thanks to better roads, schools, electrification, medical service, and so on. However, new troubles also arise. The way of thinking and the education level of many villagers cannot catch up with the speed of social and economic change. Traditional values are weakened while new values to support rural life are slow to emerge. Each farmer has increasingly less land to cultivate due to population pressure and transfer to other uses, which accelerates labor surplus in rural areas. These are the “pushing” forces of rural-urban migration for both adults and children.

There are many researchers, officials and social workers who work directly with disadvantaged children in urban areas. There have also been many studies and reports on this issue with various purposes and methods. Based on these existing works and studies, we would like to analyze the problem of street children further with a special attention on the dynamic implications of Vietnam’s economic growth.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section introduces alternative definitions and classifications of street children. Section 3 reviews existing studies of street children in HCMC and Hanoi including the recent survey conducted by VDF. Section 4 analyzes the causes and situations of street children and the mutual interaction of the two. Dynamic movements among different situations are also discussed. Section 5 presents some case studies of former street children. Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Street Children: Who Are They?**

*Street children* is the most common term used by international organizations and related agencies to refer to the type of children under our study. This term was also adopted in Vietnam and officially used in government ministries and organizations. Recently, however, some Vietnamese government offices started to use the term *children wandering and earning on streets* instead of the old term for more precision. In this paper the term *street children* continues to be used because this is still a widely and internationally accepted term which has been used for a long time.

Apart from terminology, there is also the problem in defining these children and counting them according to each definition. In Vietnam at present, no one knows the exact number of children living or working on the street, and estimates vary from one organization to another. Clearly, the problem of definition and the problem of counting are closely related. In order to compare their numbers across time and location, it is necessary to use statistics collected under consistent—or at least similar—definitions. Moreover, street children are not a homogeneous group. Each child has a different family background, a

different reason for being on the street, a different education level, and different requirements to be filled. An effective categorization will bring a better understanding of the problems and the needs of each group of street children.

## **2.1. Definitions of the government and international organizations**

Street children can be defined in a number of ways. Let us briefly look at some commonly used definitions, namely, those of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Terre des hommes Foundation, a Swiss street children NGO operating in Vietnam since 1989.

According to MOLISA, street children is one of the ten disadvantaged children groups<sup>3</sup>. Following the new law, MOLISA defines street children as “children who leave their families, earn their living by themselves, and have unstable working and living locations; or children wandering on the street with their families” (National Assembly 2004, p.2). The number of street children in the entire country is estimated to be around 19,000 in 2003, of which Hanoi accounts for 1,500 and HCMC for nearly 9,000. MOLISA does not classify street children into subcategories.

UNICEF defines street children as children under 18 years old who spend most of their time on the street. UNICEF also presents three subcategories of street children: *street living children*, *street working children* and *the children of street living families*. Street living children are those who have lost ties with their families and live alone on the street. Street working children are those who spend all or most of their time working on the street to earn income for their families or for themselves (they have a home to return to and do not usually sleep on the street). The children of street living families are those who live with their families on the street.

The definitions and categorization of Terre des hommes are similar to those of UNICEF. For this reason, the studies of street children by UNICEF and Terre des hommes should be compatible if proper care is exercised. In its survey conducted in 2000, Terre des hommes Foundation (2004) defines street children as “children under 18 years of age, earning money through casual, street-based activities such as begging, scavenging, peddling, portering, shoe shining, pick-pocketing, petty theft” and who belong to any one of the following categories:

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<sup>3</sup> MOLISA's categorization of disadvantaged children includes the following: (1) orphans and abandoned children; (2) disabled children; (3) chemical- or toxic-affected victims; (4) HIV/AIDS affected children; (5) working children in hard, toxic or risky conditions; (6) working children who live far away from their family; (7) street children; (8) sexually abused children; (9) drug-addicted children; and (10) law violators.

**Table 1. Classification of Street Children by Terre des hommes**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>A</b>	Children who have run away from home or have no home; of which A1: Sleeping on the street A2: Sleeping off the street
<b>B</b>	Children sleeping on the street with their family or guardian
<b>C</b>	Children living at home, but working in an “at risk” situation
<b>D</b>	Migrant child workers engaged in casual street activities, of which D1: Sleeping on the street D2: Sleeping off the street
Note: “at risk” means at least one of the following: (1) working at night; (2) engaging in (casual) sex work or pimping; (3) begging; and (4) using or selling drugs.	

Source: Compiled from Terre des hommes Foundation (2004), p.19.

In this paper, we basically adopt the definition of the Terre des hommes with slight modification as follows: *street children are children under 18 years of age who regularly earn money through casual, street-based activities.*

## **2.2. Difficulties in collecting data**

Even if all organizations agreed on one common definition and categorization of street children, which is not the case, data collection would not be easy due to the invisibility, mobility, and seasonality of street children.

Invisibility of street children is one of the major difficulties in conducting survey studies. Some child workers are highly visible to any observer: shoe shiners, barrow-pushers, beggars, and vendors of all kinds including trinkets, T shirts, tourist guide books, chewing gum, and lottery tickets and results. Others are much less visible: those who offer drugs or sexual services and those who only work at night. In Cau Muoi Market in HCMC, for example, there are groups of vegetable scavengers who usually work from midnight to 2 am and again from 5 am to 7 am. They sleep during the day. If a street children survey is conducted during the day time, these children are likely to be omitted (Terre des hommes Foundation 2004).

Many street children move from one location to another in search of customers. Some are willing to go anywhere to find an earning opportunity. Their high mobility creates obvious problems for those who want to count them. Some children also shift from one job to another.

Moreover, street activities are often seasonal. A survey carried out in summer will give different results from those of a winter survey. The Tet holidays also greatly influence the ebb and flow of street children.

According to Dr. Tran Trong Khue of the Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City (ISSHO) and Dr. Nguyen Thi Thanh Minh of the Committee of Population, Family and Children (CPFC) in HCMC, the *average* number of street children in HCMC in 2003 was around 8,000. However, this number fluctuated significantly within a year. The number of street children is always highest during the summer when children do not have to go to school. The children of poor rural families often take advantage of this spare time to earn extra money for their families. They leave home for urban streets and engage in vending or scavenging. The income that such a child brings home may be as much as ten times what his or her parents earn monthly doing rural jobs<sup>4</sup>. In other words, a child working this way in summer months can make a sum comparable to the family's entire rural income for the year. Children are willing to trade off their summer vacation for additional large income they may gain. This is one clear economic explanation for the higher number of street children in big cities in the summer time.

Special events like National Independence Day and Seagames 22 also affect the number. In preparation for these events, unwanted wanderers are rounded up and “institutionalized” in an effort to beautify the cities. During this time, many street children disappear from their normal locations<sup>5</sup>. Official campaigns like this leave street children with the choice of cleaning up their act entirely or leaving the urban center—often temporarily—for outer and less visible areas. If a survey does not account for these factors, the results can easily be misunderstood.

To obtain a comprehensive view of the dynamics of street children, surveys should ideally be conducted at different times in a year and at different times of the day, which permits the researcher to gain detailed information on the movements of street children as well as average trends. However, most surveys are not conducted this way due to the limitation in time, funding or human resources.

### **3. Comparing Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Past and Present**

Among the surveys on the street children in Vietnam, we have chosen four surveys for comparison. Two were conducted in HCMC while the other two were conducted in Hanoi. Two describe the situations many years ago while the other two are more recent. The four surveys are:

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<sup>4</sup> Information provided at the street children workshop conducted by VDF in HCMC in August 2004. Dr. Minh confirmed that a child from Duc Pho Commune in Quang Ngai Province, where the average monthly income was about 100,000 VND, could earn as much as 300,000 VND per month by selling lottery tickets in HCMC.

<sup>5</sup> Captured street children in Hanoi are sent to Ba Vi and Dong Dau detention centers and those in HCMC are often sent to the School for Teenagers No. 3 in Go Vap District.

(i) Terre des hommes Foundation, *Children of the Dust in Ho Chi Minh City* (1992). The survey was conducted from January to June 1992.

(ii) Terre des hommes Foundation, *A Study on Street Children in Ho Chi Minh City* (2004). The survey was conducted in 2000 and supplemented by group discussions by service providers in 2002.

(iii) Nguyen Van Buom and Jonathan Caseley, *Survey on the Situation of Street Children in Hanoi* (March 1996). The survey was conducted in November and December 1995.

(iv) A Survey on Street Children in Hanoi conducted by the VDF (unpublished). The survey was conducted in June 2004.

### **3.1. Methodology**

The four surveys above share a similar methodology. The only main differences among them are the locality and the size of surveys. In each case, information was gathered by a structured questionnaire followed by individual interviews.

The first survey was conducted by Terre des hommes in the first six months of 1992. Seven locations in HCMC were chosen: Ben Nghe area (District 1), Ben Thanh Market area (District 1), Cau Mong, Cau Muoi Market area (District 1), Cho Lon area (District 5), Sai Gon Railway Station (District 3), Western Bus Station area (Binh Chanh District), and Van Thanh Bus Station (Binh Thanh District). In each area, the sample for interview was chosen randomly. The gender ratio was chosen to be close to the actual ratio of boys and girls on the street. Interviews were conducted by three project officers and volunteers using a questionnaire.

The other Terre des hommes study was conducted in 2000 with elaborate real-time review and adjustments. The research locations included Cau Muoi Market and Cau Mong area, Pham Ngu Lao area, Ben Nghe area, Van Thanh area, Saigon Railway Station area, Cho Lon area, Western Bus Station area, and Ben Thanh Market area. Survey conductors spent eleven days in each area. They initially examined the general profile of the street child community in that area with a view to defining a representative group for individual interviews. Then they pre-tested the structured interview in the field. Following that, a workshop by survey conductors was held to revise the technique. It reviewed the appropriateness of the categorization of street children, the definition and selection of representative groups, and the methods of conducting individual interviews with the children, data collection, and report writing. As a result of this review, the questionnaire and interview technique were modified. Continual support from the Terre des hommes survey coordinator and regular whole-group meetings further facilitated real-time process review.

The survey by Buom and Caseley was carried out in 1995 in four urban districts of Hanoi, namely, Hai Ba Trung, Hoan Kiem, Dong Da, and Ba Dinh; and in one rural



district of Hanoi, namely, Gia Lam. The survey instrument was a two-part questionnaire completed through two separate meetings with each child. The meetings of all research teams were held weekly to discuss the progress of the survey and to solve any problems each team might have encountered.

The most recent survey was conducted by VDF in June 2004 in four main districts of Hanoi: Hoan Kiem, Hai Ba Trung, Thanh Xuan, and Tay Ho. The survey instrument was a questionnaire. The interviews were conducted by four people which included one VDF researcher and three social workers of the Youth Volunteer Club of the Student Magazine of Vietnam.

Below, we highlight differences between the two cities and shifting trends over time based on these four surveys. Since their sample sizes and survey locations differ, the results are not perfectly comparable and care should be exercised in interpreting the results. Nevertheless, broad pictures should still be valid.

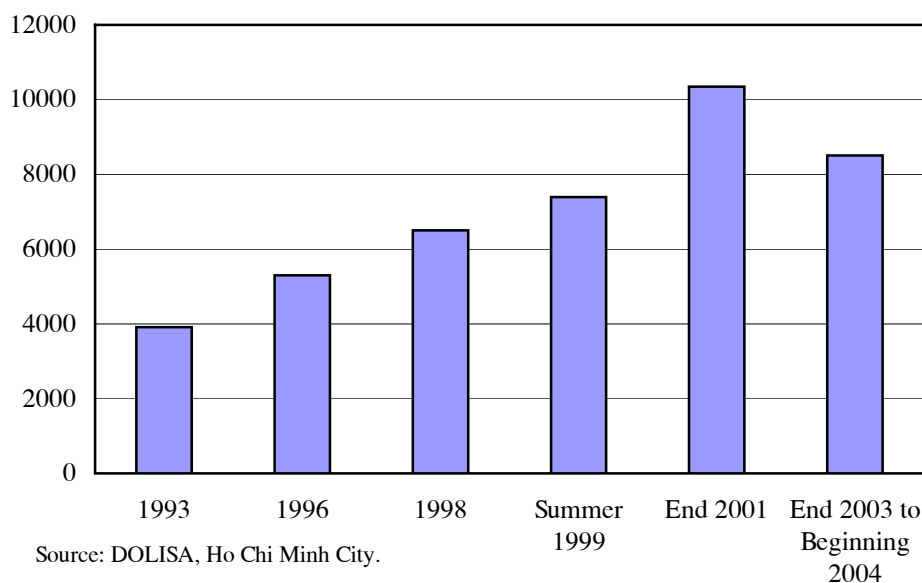
### **3.2 Trends in number**

The annual statistical report of MOLISA indicates that the total number of street children in Vietnam increased significantly in recent years. In 1997 there were 13,377 street children, which rose to 19,047 in 1998 and to 21,016 in 2001. This suggests that the number of new kids on the street is higher than the number of kids who quit street life or those who are no longer counted as street children because they have grown older. The annual statistical report of MOLISA also shows that street children are concentrated in the two urban centers of Hanoi and HCMC. The number of street children is increasing in both cities although special events like Seagames 22 temporarily decrease their number.

Figure 1 reports the number of street children in HCMC at irregular intervals as reported by the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA) in HCMC. The increasing trend is consistent with the national data up to 2001, but there was a sudden and significant drop immediately after Seagames 22 and the passage of the new Law on Child Care, Protection and Education by the National Assembly. Whether this reduction is permanent or temporary remains to be seen.

Although it is noted by government officials that the number of street children in Hanoi fell after the program of sending street children back to their hometown was introduced in 2003, the essence of the problem may not have changed much. There are no reliable and concrete data on the number of street children in Hanoi for the past few years. According to interviews conducted by VDF, the current number of street children in Hanoi in comparison with past years may not have decreased significantly, although they may be more scattered and less visible. Some argue that the problem of street children cannot be solved unless its root cause such as rural poverty is properly dealt with. Thus, whether the number of street children in Hanoi is stable or changing remains an open question. No one is sure at the moment.

**Figure 1. Street children in Ho Chi Minh City**



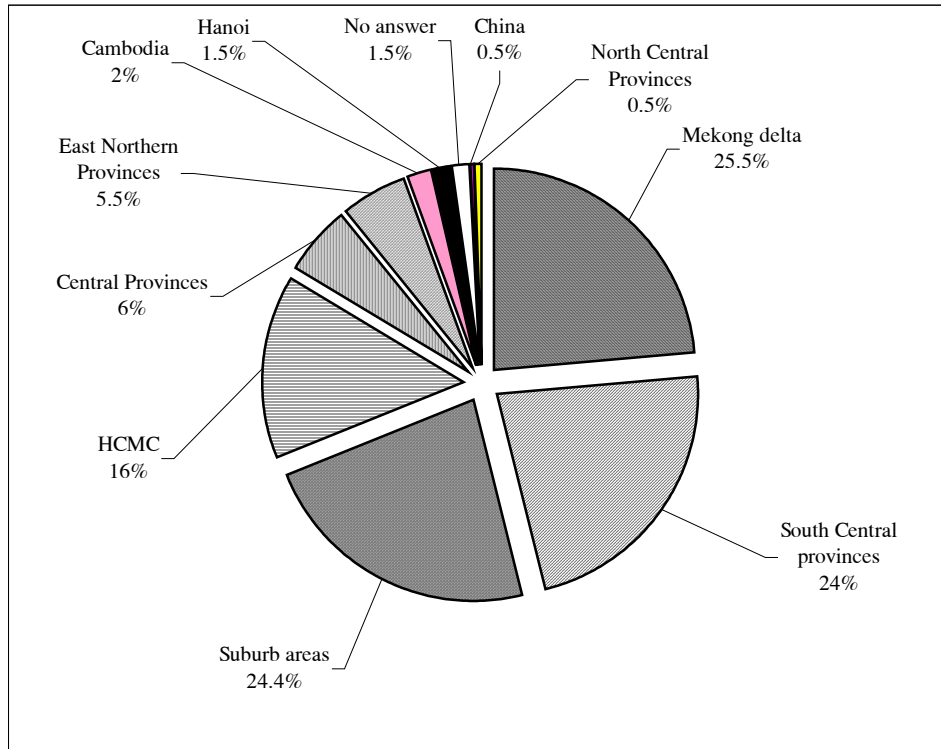
### **3.3 Where are they from?**

It is well known that a vast majority of street children seen in big cities are from rural areas, not from the cities themselves. But if we look closely, there are some differences and trends in the characteristics of street children in HCMC and Hanoi.

According to the survey in 1992, 49.5% of the street children in HCMC came from the Mekong Delta and South Central provinces. Together with children from HCMC itself and its vicinity, a vast majority (86%) were from the southern half of the country. At that time, northern children and north central children were relatively few (7% and 6.5% respectively).

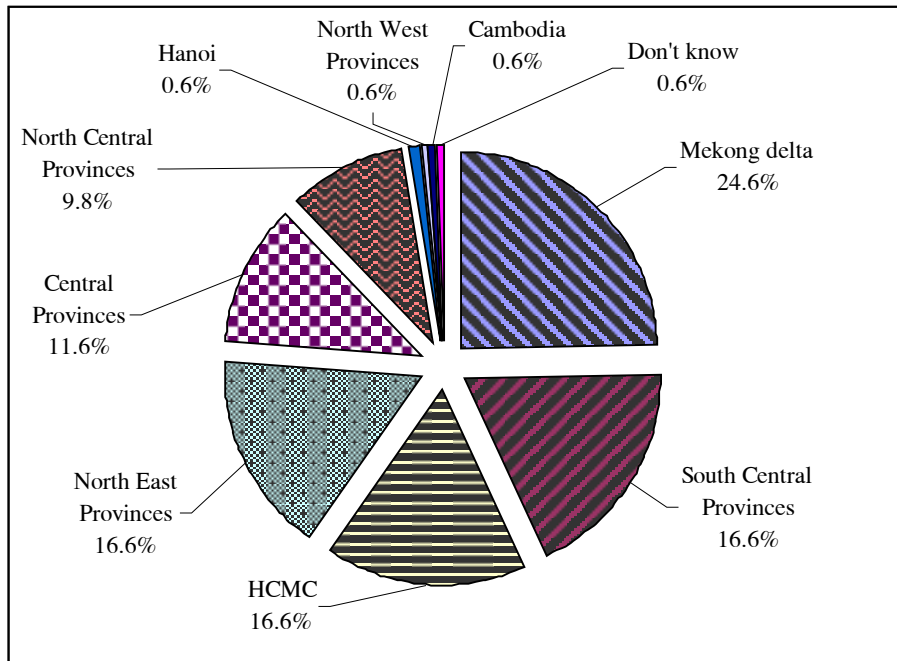
By 2000, the hometowns of street kids in HCMC were a little more widely spread, although 74% still came from the southern half of the country. But the categorization of street children provides more detailed information. More than 70% of children in categories A, B and C (see Table 1 above) came from the south and south central part of the country while more than 60% of children in category D (economic motive) are from the north and north central part. This indicates that, in recent years, most of the northern children in HCMC moved there as migrant workers. Category D children have different attitudes and behavior from the other types because their lives and jobs are more “stable” even though their earnings are generally low.

**Figure 3. Hometowns of HCMC Street Children in 1992**



Source: Terre des hommes Foundation (1992).

**Figure 4. Hometowns of HCMC Street Children in 2000**



Source: Terre des hommes Foundation (2004).

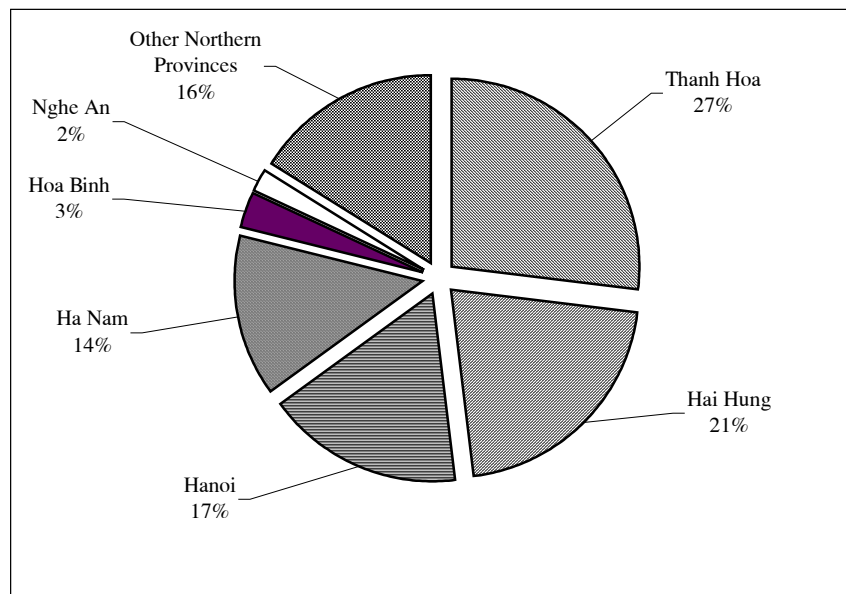
In the survey of Buom and Caseley conducted in Hanoi in 1995, the largest number of interviewed children came from Thanh Hoa province (27%). Children from Hai Hung (now split to Hai Duong and Hung Yen) ranked second (21%). Children from Hanoi itself (17%) and Ha Nam (14%) followed.

Similarly with HCMC, the hometowns of street children in Hanoi have shifted somewhat and become more diversified after nine years. The latest distribution of hometowns is shown in Figure 6.

These two surveys confirm what is well known among those working with street children in Hanoi. The majority of working children come from rural areas and, among them, Thanh Hoa sends the largest number<sup>6</sup>. Even in 2004, the survey could not detect any street children whose native land is in the south of the country<sup>7</sup>.

On the contrary, HCMC as the economic hub of Vietnam attracts far more economic migrant workers than Hanoi. There are even some Hanoian and Cambodian children working in the streets of HCMC (0.6 % each) while in Hanoi we observe no street children from HCMC or foreign countries.

**Figure 5. Hometowns of Hanoi Street Children in 1995**

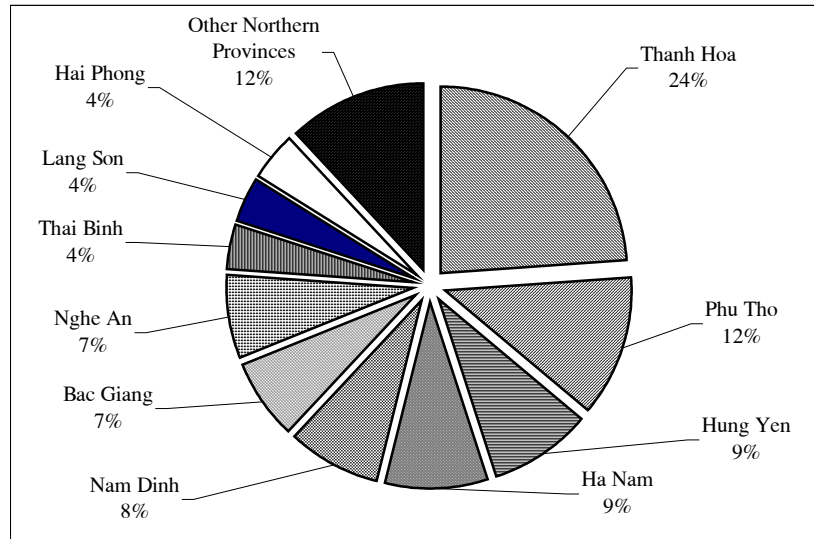


Source: Buom and Caseley (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Thanh Hoa is a poor coastal province in the south of Hanoi. It is traditional for Thanh Hoa people to leave hometown for big cities to make a living. Three villages (Quang Hai, Quang Thai and Quang Loi) are particularly “famous” as the homes of many migrants to Hanoi as well as to HCMC.

<sup>7</sup> In the southern provinces, if a child has to leave home for urban working life, he or she always goes to HCMC because this city is not only nearer and transportation is more convenient but also there is a mindset among rural people to favor HCMC over any other cities.

**Figure 6. Hometowns of Hanoi Street Children in 2004**



Source: VDF survey (2004).

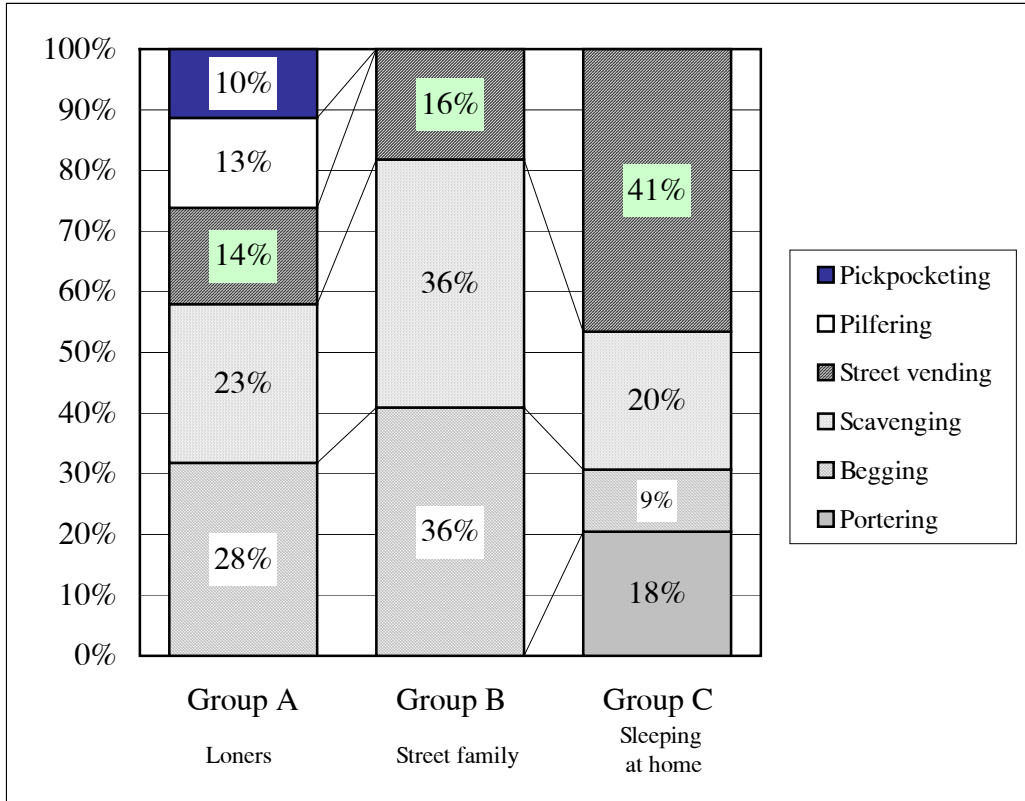
### **3.4. What do they do?**

Generally speaking, jobs that street children undertake most frequently include scavenging, shoe shining, street vending, begging, selling lottery tickets or lottery results, pick-pocketing, and pilfering in the market (in this study we also include illegal activities as “jobs”). Here again, however, we see some differences and trends according to gender, age, location, and survey years.

The most popular jobs for boys are shoe shining, selling lottery tickets, pick-pocketing, and market portering. Meanwhile, girls often engage in selling lottery tickets and street vending. Small children often start with begging and waste scavenging because they are too young to do physically demanding works like portering. Older children like to work as street vendors after they gain certain street life experience. Many of them do more than two jobs at the same time.

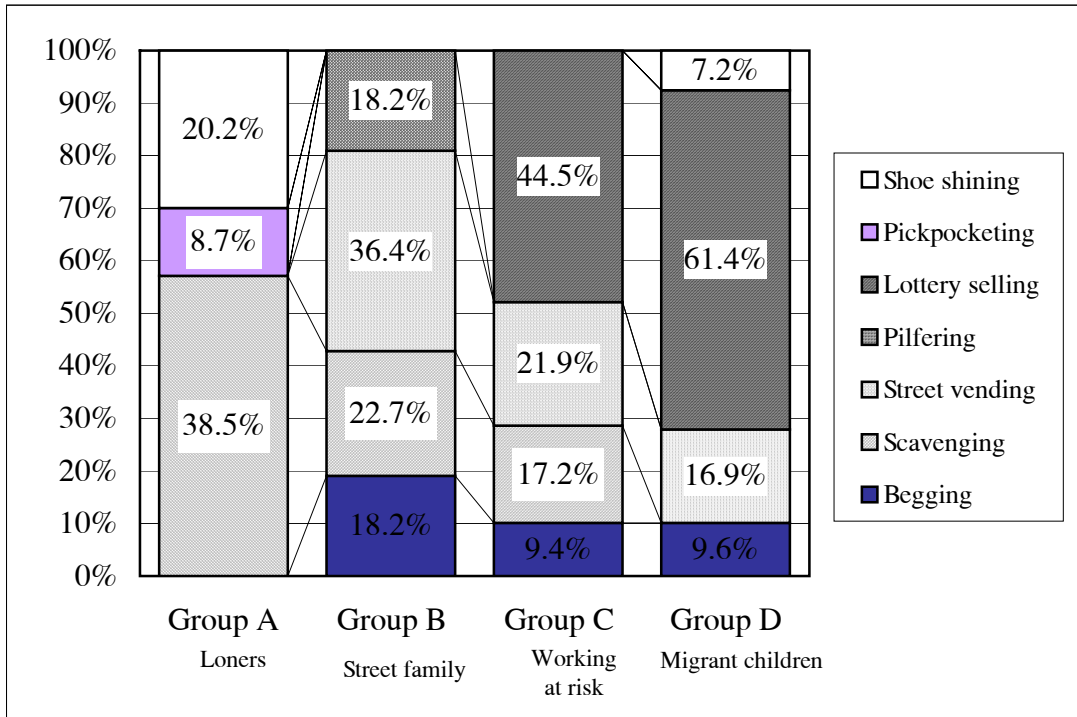
The next two diagrams show the occupational distribution of street children in HCMC in 1992 and 2000.

**Figure 7. Occupations of HCMC Children in 1992**



Source: Terre des hommes Foundation (2004).

**Figure 8. Occupations of HCMC Children in 2000**



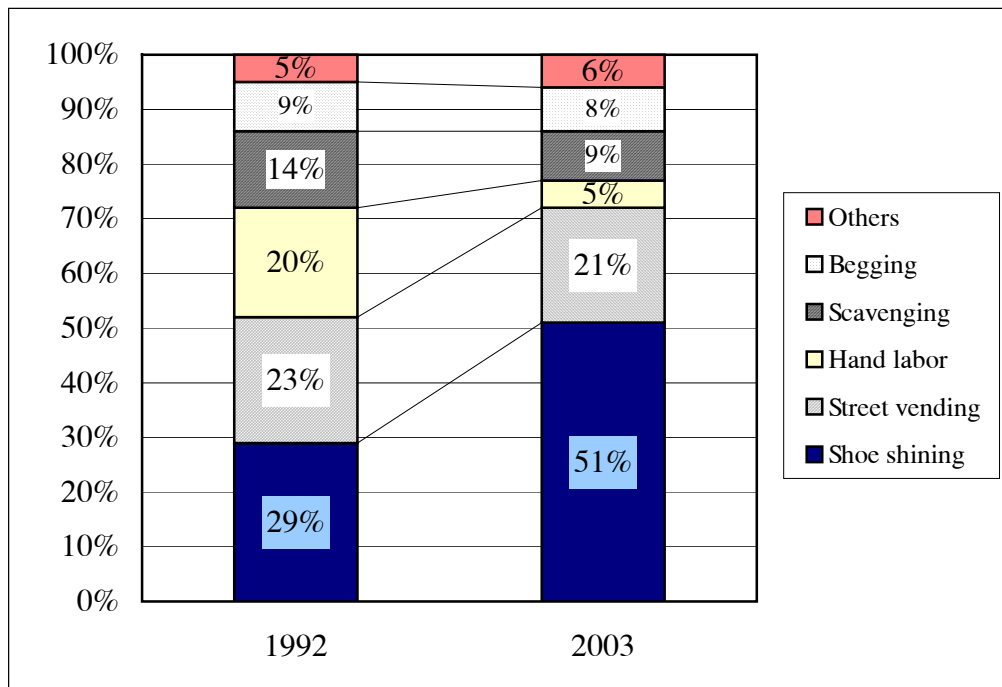
Source: Terre des hommes Foundation (2004).

There is a current boom in the selling lottery tickets and shoe shining in HCMC, neither of which existed in the 1992 survey. On the other hand, there is a significant decrease in begging since that time.

The most common jobs among street boys in Hanoi are shoe shining and lottery result sales. Scavenging and street vending are jobs that girls often do. The survey in 1992 identified top five jobs for working children, namely, begging (9%), scavenging (14%), street vending (23%), shoe shining (29%) and hand labor (20%).

The two recent surveys in Hanoi, the one conducted in 2003 (Committee of Population, Family and Children, 2003ab) and the other conducted by VDF in 2004, also confirm that these occupations are the most popular ones.

**Figure 9. Occupations of Hanoi Street Children in 1992 and 2003**



Sources: Buom and Caseley (1996) and unpublished data of the Committee of Population, Family and Children in Hanoi (2003).

### 3.5 A note on lottery tickets

Although the occupations of street children in HCMC and Hanoi mostly overlap, some jobs undertaken by HCMC children are rarely seen in Hanoi, and vice versa. One example is seen in lottery business.

In HCMC, lottery ticket sale is a very popular job for children of every age. The lottery ticket sales system is more “developed” in HCMC with a large number of lottery agents organizing child sellers. The adult sales agents receive lottery tickets from the state-owned lottery company and redistribute them to children. The adult agents bear the business risk and refunds children for the unsold portion of lottery tickets at the end of the day. These organizers sometimes provide children with food and sleeping quarters. All profits from selling the lottery tickets belong to the children.

In Hanoi, lottery tickets are sold by small-scale adult agents along streets. No child is involved as there is no organization to mobilize street children to sell lottery tickets. However, the announcement of lottery ticket results is more “exciting” than in HCMC. Every day from 5:30 pm to 7:00 pm, hundreds of children gather at the lottery result centers in Tang Bat Ho Street and Hue Street. They record the results, carbon copy them, and run as fast as they can to every lane and corner of Hanoi to sell them. While each result sheet costs only 500 VND, a child with quick feet can earn 10,000 VND per day on average. In HCMC no child sells lottery ticket results since the results are provided free of charge by any lottery agent right after the results are announced.

#### **4. New Typology Based on Causes and Situations**

While the existing classifications of street children, such as the one proposed by the Terre des hommes Foundation (Table 1), are operationally useful in conducting surveys, we need a more structured classification for further analysis. In this section we propose a new typology of street children based on the distinction between causes and situations, and the relationship between them. In considering the situations, it is necessary to separately discuss current deprivation (poverty, health problems, emotional crisis, and so on) and the lack of future investment (education, training, job prospects, and so on).

##### **4.1. Causes**

The causes of driving school-age children to the street can be divided into three main groups which we shall call *broken family*, *mindset problem*, and *economic migration*. While these causes are mutually related and overlapping, the main cause can usually be identified for each street child. It is necessary to clearly distinguish them for deeper analysis and proper design of intervention, as we will see below.

##### Group I: broken family

This group includes children with extremely difficult family situations such as being orphaned or abandoned as a result of the death, divorce or separation of the parents, becoming a victim of domestic violence or sexual abuse, and the like. This is the traditional cause of street children which exists in any developing country with or without economic growth.



The increasing number of divorce is a pressing issue in the Vietnam society, of which children are always the first victims. The disintegration of the family is a great shock to them even if one of the parents continues to take care of them. Children abandoned as a result of parents' divorce have to undergo an even greater emotional shock. Being left with relatives or grandparents, such children are easily discouraged from study and lured by bad friends. Psychological damage is particularly severe when a child loses one or both of the parents when it is very young.

There are approximately 120,000 abandoned children all over the country. Another estimate says that 3.4% of abandoned children are street children. This means that more than 4,000 abandoned children are roaming in the street<sup>8</sup>. From another angle, the recent survey of the Committee of Population, Family and Children in Hanoi (2004) discovered that 12.3% of the interviewed children were from a broken family.

Domestic violence is a controversial topic that attracts much attention. There are a variety of definitions and opinions concerning domestic violence. Outdated feudal ideas still permeate in the relationship between husband and wife as well as between parents and children. Feudal ideology remains relatively more strongly among rural people. In such a case, family quarrels are common. The majority, both women and men, agree that if the wife does something wrong, the husband has the right to slap her. They believe that, by doing so, the husband is fulfilling the role of the head of the family and the role of a man.

Domestic violence takes many forms from physical violence such as beating to psychological violence such as scolding, threatening, and making quarrels. Many children leave home because they cannot bear the domestic violence inflicted on them. The most common situations include being beaten by a drunk father or being scolded very severely when a child has done something wrong.

Most of the street children who have left home because of domestic violence are spiritually and emotionally impaired. While in-depth scientific research on the effects of domestic violence on the psychology of street children is lacking, this cause is mentioned in every survey on street children.

### Group II: mindset problem

This is a case where the family enjoys relatively unbroken relations and an average—or at least not so destitute—standard of living but still sends children to work in the street due to the wrong attitude of the parents or the children themselves.

Some children leave home because they are lured by friends or because they want to savor freedom instead of going to school. Seemingly exciting life in big cities and friends who already know the street life are the pulling force. For such children, earning money is not the main purpose. Naturally, they easily succumb to social evils like heroin, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency.

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<sup>8</sup> “MOLISA data for 2001” as quoted in Committee of Population, Family and Children in Hanoi (2004).

However, the mindset problem most often arises on the parent side. Some parents think that cash income is more important than children's education. The temptation of luxurious life breeds and reinforces the wrong attitude of the parents. By preventing their kids from going to school and forcing them to work hard for the family, they become a negative constraint on the children's development. It is observed that some parents trade children's future for nice furniture, electronic appliances or a new house today. Unfortunately, there seems to be a positive correlation between rapid economic growth and the wrong attitude of adults. When the living standard improves day by day, this type of street children tend to increase.

### Group III: economic migration

Children who are forced by dire poverty to migrate to urban areas to earn a living belong to this group. Here, the main cause of migration is economic. The important feature of this group is that the parents do not want their sons or daughters to drop out of school and take to the street, but they feel there is no other choice given their economic situation. The children themselves often want to continue schooling as well. What is important in identifying this group is not whether the child has both parents or only one parent, but whether or not family bond and consideration for children's future exist. With proper love, even children raised by only one parent or grandparents will retain the right attitude toward education.

There is no doubt that family poverty is one of the major causes of street children. Due to family poverty, children cannot study and play, lose the care or protection of a guardian, and have to work long hours in unfriendly places. In every survey discussed in Section 3 above, more than 70% of the street children answered that they were working in the street because of their family poverty.

Poverty may be the result of a natural disaster, the death or desertion of a bread earner, job loss, illness, injury, divorce, separation, the death of livestock, crop failure, theft, increase in dependents, and so on. Some of these overlap with the problem of broken family discussed above while others are beyond the control of the household. When they occur, poverty and hunger become inevitable.

## **4.2. Situations**

Each street child is different. Apart from the initial cause that drives the child out onto the street, their life and working styles vary greatly. It is important to clearly distinguish their situations because their needs and required assistance also vary greatly with their situations. This paper proposes to divide the situations that street children face into two dimensions, namely, the degrees of *current protection* and *investment for future*. For all deprived people, current protection is of utmost concern for the respect for human dignity and ensuring the minimum standard of life. But for children, investment in their future is equally—or even more—crucial.

## Current Protection

Current protection refers to whether or not the child is protected physically and mentally against various risks *now* so that his or her daily life is not excessively miserable or threatened. This further breaks down into several contributing factors such as:

1. Physical health (injury, sickness, malnutrition, drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, physical disability, etc)
2. Mental health (fear, lack of love, trauma, lack of concentration or discipline, mental disability, etc)
3. Assault risk (bullied, beaten, tortured, raped, detained, sold, etc)
4. Job hazard (engaged in an “at risk” job—see Table 1 above)
5. Financial shocks (family needs medicine, being cheated, money is stolen, fined by police, etc.)
6. Shelter (sleep under a roof or outside)
7. Adult protection and guidance (parent, guardian, NGO, etc.)
8. Group protection (work and live in group or alone)

The first two (1, 2) describe the present condition of the child while the next three (3, 4, 5) measure the degree of uncontrollable risk to which he or she is subjected. The remaining three factors (6, 7, 8) help the child to avoid potential problems or deal effectively with the problems that have arisen. While these factors may improve or deteriorate simultaneously, they are in principle separate and can take different values for each child. We can say that the child is well protected against imminent risks if these factors are all favorable, and conversely if they are poor in every direction<sup>9</sup>.

## Future Investment

Another key element in gauging the welfare of children is whether they are receiving adequate education or training in preparation for the future. Without investment in human capital, children cannot expect any bright future or realize any dream, even if they are well fed and protected today. Naturally, therefore, this should be the second dimension in defining their situation. With adequate knowledge and skill, children will have a much greater chance of escaping the current misery through finding a stable and safer job. At the same time, this prospect gives them hope, encouragement, and a new meaning to their tough life at present.

More specifically, future investment can take several forms. If the child has been out of school for a few years or less, returning to formal schooling should be seriously considered. The child should study at least up to the 12th grade and be given a chance to go to a university if warranted. If this option is not feasible, private tutoring by volunteer teachers and classes offered by NGOs may substitute. For those who have been out of

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<sup>9</sup> The Terre des homes Foundation uses some of these situational factors (job hazard, shelter, adult protection) along with what we call *causes* (broken family, street family (mindset problem), economic migration), in its classification of street children in Table 1 above. In this paper, we prefer to treat causes and situations differently.

school for a long time and no longer have the aptitude to study for many years, vocational training of shorter duration should be provided. Among general skills, English and computer are very popular among aspiring street children. But they should be combined with more specific vocational training which fits the characteristics of each child. Equally important but frequently neglected is the need to link vocational training to actual jobs. Guidance and assistance in job search are crucial in determining whether learned skills are used productively or wasted.

There are some factors that impede the child's investment for the future. The first and perhaps the most common is the financial factor. Most classes and training programs require a fee. If the fee is out of reach of the child, he or she is not able to attend.

The second is the time constraint. Even if a course is offered for free, the child still faces a tradeoff between work and knowledge because of the opportunity cost related to time. If the child goes to school, he or she will earn less on the street. Similarly, if the course takes a long time, in terms of hours per day or duration in months or years, the child is less likely to choose to attend—unless sufficient compensation is offered to cover the lost working time. In this sense, financial and time constraints are related.

Third, many street children simply lack the discipline and patience needed to attend a course. The longer they have been on the street, the more so.

Fourth, another important factor is the encouragement (or lack of it) from the community surrounding the child. If the child's friends begin to attend a class, he or she is more likely to attend it too. Among fellow street children, the contagion effect is usually very powerful. Similarly, the child will attend classes more regularly if they receive constant encouragement from their parents or adult acquaintances. On the contrary, however, if the parents positively discourage the child from studying, an obedient child may easily follow this advice. The objection of an unwilling parent is one of the biggest obstacles in sending street children to school or a training program.

### **4.3 Correlation and dynamism between causes and situations**

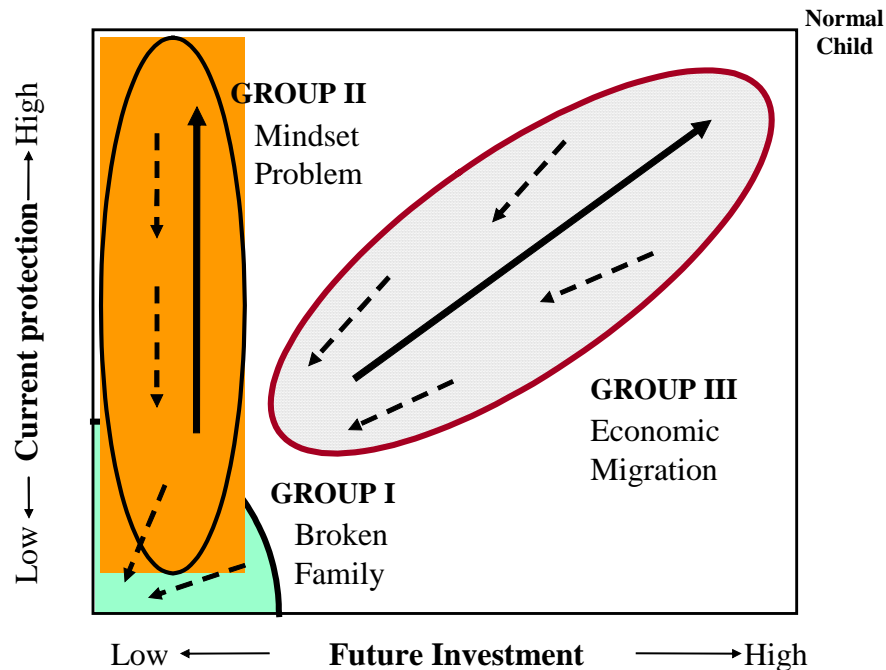
#### Typical situations and aspirations

While all street children face the risky situations of street life, the kind and degree of risks they have to cope with differ significantly depending on the initial cause of becoming street children.

Children from a broken family (Group I) are least protected against current risks and without investment opportunities. Their life situation is often much tougher than street children of other groups. The risks of drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, assault, abuse, sexual exploitation and other serious troubles are much higher with this group even if they try to protect themselves by roaming and sleeping together (and much worse if they are alone). Similarly—and regrettably—the risk of becoming a promoter of social evil rather than its victim is also high. These children are rarely seen to be going to school or receiving

vocational training on their own. With a prolonged rough life, they have become streetwise and often lost the discipline and patience required to keep regular time and study hard. They are stuck at the lower left corner of Figure 10 and can hardly escape the situation without proper and dedicated intervention.

**Figure 10. Current Protection and Future Investment**



Note: The vertical and horizontal axes represent the two dimensions of the *situation* of street children. On the other hand, groups classify street children by their *causes*. The solid arrow indicates the aspiration of each group while the dashed arrow indicates unexpected setbacks.

Children who drop out of school due to the wrong attitude of the parents (Group II) are less deprived, relatively speaking, in the current situation than the first group since their parents can look after them. They are relatively well fed and protected. It is rare to see them severely victimized by street gangs or even joining them. The biggest problem with this group, however, is the strong opposition of the parents when someone (teacher, social worker, or the children themselves) proposes an education or training program for them. Migrating families work hard to move up from the lower left corner to the upper left corner of the diagram, but they do not invest in the children's future<sup>10</sup>.

Children who migrate for economic reasons (Group III) face least difficulty in comparison with the other two groups, provided that their family ties are basically intact and children retain the right attitude and a strong desire for studying and improving life.

<sup>10</sup> One NGO assisting street children in Hanoi reports the case of a boy whose parents forbid him to go to school. Driven by the love of learning, he ran away from home to work and study in Hanoi.

Their main or only reason for joining the street life is economic. They often have close contacts with people from the native village and rent a room with previous neighbors. Collective protection provides them with an adequate risk sharing mechanism against the contingencies of falling ill, running out of money, and the like. Moreover, they are often very eager to return to school or learn useful skills for the future if the opportunity arises, and some actually go to school by their own. Their parents normally support their aspiration. Children in this group are equipped with the right attitude and incentive to move not only vertically (upward) but also horizontally (rightward) in Figure 10.

If each street child is given a score between 1 and 10 in the degree of current protection and future investment respectively, his or her situation may be identified with a location in this diagram. Contributing factors to current protection include physical and mental health, assault risk, job security, financial situation, shelter, adult protection, and group protection as explained above. Contributing factors to future investment include the status of schooling, training, access to job information, and proper guidance and counseling by professionals. By giving these scores to street children, it is possible to quantify their plight, identify the group to which they belong, and devise the way to guide them toward the right paths.

However, such measurement also has limitations especially with respect to comparison and aggregation. Two variables may not be able to capture the complexity of the situation each child faces. For example, even if two children score the same in current protection, the first child may have good health but little parental protection, and conversely with the second child. Having the same score does not mean that they suffer from the same problem or need the same intervention. This warning also applies to the scoring in future investment. Additionally, it is difficult to decide how much weight each factor should receive in constructing such a score. Is job security and shelter equally important? Should formal schooling be given more points than vocational training? Or should all factors receive one point each? This is a conundrum which defies an easy solution. Any scoring system must therefore resort to some tentative convention.

Even so, giving numerical scores to the situation of each street child may be a good first step toward an objective quantification of his or her plight, supplementing narrative description.

### Setbacks

While Group I children are stuck at the lower left corner of Figure 10, Group II children (with their parents) attempt to climb upward, and Group III children want to move closer to the bliss point in the upper right corner where current protection and future investment are both available. But these movements are frequently interrupted by uncontrollable negative shocks which tend to pull the children back to where they started, or worse. These setbacks are indicated in dashed arrows in Figure 10.

Accidental setbacks occur at two levels: individual shocks and macro (or societal) shocks. Shocks that befall on the child or its family partly overlap with those that initially sent them to the street. They include family problems, financial hardship, sickness, injury,

assaults, psychological crisis, drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, arrest and detention, and so on. By contrast, macro shocks affect a broad segment of the society but hit vulnerable groups (including street children) particularly harshly—for example, natural disasters, economic recession, fluctuation in tourism, bird flu and other epidemics, international events that require clean streets, seasonal business fluctuations, and so on. While street children must cope with both shocks, different groups are impacted differently.

These shocks have immediate and heavily negative influences on Group I children who are already suffering from the worst situation. This is because they lack the knowledge to avoid such shocks as well as the risk sharing mechanism to ameliorate the shocks once they occur. As a consequence, they are more vulnerable to sickness, injury, financial hardship, and so forth, and more susceptible to the temptation of social evils. They are caught in a hopeless trap.

Children in Groups II and III are better off in the sense that they have more protection and guidance from the parent or the group to which they belong. But such protection and guidance are neither perfect nor available for all contingencies. If the shock becomes uncontrollable for the child (or its friends or parents), there will be a slippage toward either downward or leftward, or both. The child may become hungry or sick, and may even quit studying. In the worst case, it may lose the family or group protection and migrate to Group I.

## **5. Former Street Children: Where Are They Now?**

There is no survey which systematically tracks the same children over the years. The number of street children is reported every year and many surveys are conducted to describe the situation at any one point in time, but no study seriously asks the question like: what happens to today's street children when they grow older, whether surveyed children are the same individuals examined in previous surveys, or how many of the children of former street children become a new generation of street children. This paper shares the same weakness as other studies<sup>11</sup>. However, we hope to provide some anecdotal evidence on the long-term aspect of the street children problem so that the reader can sense the breadth of the problem. Information below is acquired through personal contacts that the authors have had in Hanoi and HCMC since the mid 1990s.

Paths traveled by street children to adulthood vary greatly from one child to another. Some youths graduate from the status of precarious hand-to-mouth living to a respectable career in the formal sector. This is achieved through self-effort, good luck, and assistance from people who recognize their latent talent. On the other hand, it is hardly deniable that

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<sup>11</sup> One way to track the growth of children consistently is to analyze the records kept by shelters which house former street children until they reach the age of 17 or even above. There are many domestic and foreign organizations that provide such assistance in Vietnam. However, such data may suffer from the winners' bias since only the relatively successful children are admitted to shelters. There are also many children these shelters do not accept because their conditions are too difficult to manage and their admission would have an undesirable effect on other children.

some unfortunate adolescents fall deeper and deeper into trouble until they destroy themselves or become menace to the society. But the majority of street children seem to grow into street adults without meeting a brilliant success or a dreadful end. Lacking education and a stable job, they continue to work in the street, manage to make a living, get married, and raise a family while coping with the same risk and uncertainty of street life they have known for a long time. Whether the children of such street adults will also become street children is an important determining factor of the street children problem in the future. Many street adults genuinely desire to send their kids to school and terminate the generational vicious circle, but whether they can actually do so depends mainly on their financial situation.

As expected from the discussion of Section 4, Group I children have the least chance to move up in the long run. On the other hand, it is not uncommon to see Group III children achieve academic and professional success. The prospects of Group II children lie between these two cases. Below, six actual cases are presented for illustration. Each case is classified into one of the three groups according to the most important cause for street life. As noted earlier, however, the three causes overlap and interact with each other. The classification here should be taken as only indicative. The age shown below is according to the western calendar as of end 2004.

Miss A—Group I (broken family), age 19

The father of Miss A was a landless farmer in Hung Yen. He married three wives consecutively. Miss A and his elder brother are the children of his third wife. She also had one younger brother but he was “stolen” in his infancy and she says that is why her mother became a little crazy. Miss A has one living half-sister whom she met only once. When Miss A was very young, the family traveled extensively in Vietnam to beg including HCMC, Hue and Hai Phong. In the past, the poor often traveled free by train. But she does not remember much about these days.

In 1995, when Miss A was ten years old, the family “settled down” in Hanoi. They slept outside the Big Church and continued to beg. The municipal cleaning workers sometimes invited them to take shelter in their make-shift house while they were at work. A foreign priest helped Miss A to go to school up to the sixth grade. Her parents were often caught by police and detained. At one time, she was sent to live with an unmarried young couple. The lady there forced her to sell postcards near Hoan Kiem Lake and inhale an illegal drug. Since then, Miss A has been addicted to heroin.

The family subsequently moved to a humble shack in an area of Hanoi inhabited by migrants from outer provinces. Miss A continued to sell in the street, her mother collected waste, and her elder brother was a shoe shiner as well as a thief. Many individuals and NGOs tried to help her without much success. Recently, the father’s health deteriorated significantly while being detained at Ba Vi for four years. Miss A struggled to obtain necessary official documents and stamps to get him out.



In early 2004, her father was released from Ba Vi for the reason of terminal weakness. After he passed away and her mother and brother were again caught by the police and sent to Ba Vi, Miss A became homeless. She began to sleep alone outside, wear tattered clothes, and eat the leftover food of others. She fell and injured herself and could no longer go to Hoan Kiem Lake to earn money. She admits that she still can earn money to buy heroin by herself becoming a drug pusher. Although she sometimes tries hard to escape from her fate, hard circumstances and deep psychological wounds have made her distrustful of others. Her stubbornness as well as the lack of future investment makes it extremely difficult for anyone to help her.

Miss B—Group II (economic migration), age 25

When Miss B was eight years old, her parents were divorced and she and her younger sister were sent to live with the grandmother. She went to school in the morning and worked as a baby sitter and house maid in the afternoon. Although she was a very good student and a monitor at school, she had to drop out at the fifth grade because her family was too poor to pay the school fee. Two months later, she left the village for Hanoi with 50,000 dong in her pocket. Since then, she has been working in Hanoi for twelve years.

At first, she bought miscellaneous things in Dong Xuan Market and sold them in the streets. Two years later, she began to study English and simultaneously go to Nguyen Van To school with the help of one foreigner. While continuing to sell in the street, Miss B attended evening classes. To save money, she spent only 1,000 dong on bread for her daily food.

After shifting from one job to another, Miss B became a receptionist at a mini hotel in the Old Quarter of Hanoi. She was very quick to learn new work and gain experience. Her English was better than any other street children. Recognizing her potential, another foreigner offered to be a business partner to open a mini hotel of her own. It met with immediate success. Currently, Miss B is a manager of two mini hotels, both of which are profitable.

Miss B was an economic migrant who did not want to quit school to become a street kid in the first place. Although her parents were divorced, she had spiritual support of her mother and grandmother. She also had an insatiable desire and determination to become an entrepreneur. External financial support was the only thing she needed to realize her dream.

Miss C—Group III (mindset problem), age 18

Miss C and her mother are from a village in Tien Giang, but they usually stay in a rented room in HCMC and sell coconuts in the heart of the city. Miss C has no father but has one brother who is also a coconut seller. She cannot say clearly when she dropped out of school. The mother and the daughter sell chilled coconuts together from early morning to late night or until all merchandise is sold. Sales are better on hot days and they rest on

rainy days. Carrying dozens of coconuts weighing up to 30 kilograms is a tough job for a young girl. Like other sellers, Miss C is very good at running from police.

Initially, Miss C spoke only Vietnamese with strong southern accents. Her writing was poor. But soon she picked up fragments of various languages, including English, German and Japanese, from foreigners. She likes to throw dirty words at them. Some foreigners like to take her and her friends on a day trip to Mekong. On major holidays like Tet or when major events are held in HCMC, they return to Tien Giang to rest. Their house is simple and decent, and has a TV and a video machine. Miss C hopes to get married with a German boy.

A local NGO in HCMC has tried to send her to an informal English class. A modest financial sum was introduced to compensate for the lost sales as the mother was unsure of the benefit of letting Miss C receive education. Many of her seller friends studied hard and subsequently received assistance in job training and placement, but Miss C skipped classes frequently and finally dropped out. After Seagames 22, it became increasingly difficult to sell in the central districts of HCMC and the NGO sometimes loses track of the family.

Mr. D—Group II (economic migration), age 26 if alive

The father of Mr. D passed away in 1990. Mr. D had no brother or sister. Leaving his mother in Ha Tay, he came to Hanoi in the early 1990s to sell postcards to foreign tourists. Although he had a few friends among boy sellers, he was basically alone in his work and life since he was the only one from his village. He picked up English on the street as well as received modest assistance from foreigners to go to English courses. He also went to the driving school but could not complete the lesson due to the lack of money. He did not receive any consistent training to get a stable job, so he continued to sell postcards. He was caught by police and sent to the detention center a few times.

In 1999 he married a seller girl whom he knew for a long time, but his life remained as hard as before. He was addicted to heroin and gradually lost his weight and health. Two years ago, his friends reported his death. The cause was pneumonia related to his drug addiction.

Mrs. E—Group II (economic migration), age 23

In the mid 1990s, Mrs. E came from a village to sell postcards to foreigners in the Hoan Kiem Lake area and send money monthly to her parents. She has both parents and three siblings. Her family is poor but not desperately poor in the village. She dropped out of school after the fifth grade and never returned to formal schooling. Since she was in a large group of young female sellers from the same village, she sold and slept with them in a rented room. She received foreigners' help in going to English and sewing classes. Her English improved, but she was not successful in finding a stable job.

As the police crackdown on street vendors intensified over the years, she switched to T shirt sales away from the Hoan Kiem Lake area. In 1999 he married a boy from the village next to hers and had a baby in the following year. Now Mrs. E and her husband sell T shirts together on a motorbike all around Hanoi. The couple is still poor but happy with each other. However, Mrs. E realizes that their occupation is too unstable with the possibility of official arrest, and wants to find better jobs for herself and her husband. At present, she is seeking financial help from others to send her husband to a driving school. She herself is thinking of opening a small shop but people around her warn that it is a risky move if the shop fails.

Mrs. E feels it unfair that honest sellers like her are often detained together with thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts and pushers, and other criminals. These sellers are doing what is necessary to survive with no evil intention on the society, she says. Another injustice she can hardly bear is the fact that rich detainees are released soon while poor people like her must do full time at the detention center. But she knows that her protestation is unlikely to be heard.

#### Mr. F—Group II (economic migration), age 22

Mr. F also came from the country side in a group to sell postcards in the Hoan Kiem Lake area in 1998. His father died and his mother remarried, so he and his younger sister were placed under the care of the grandparents. Although his case may be classified as Group I (broken family), group protection and the existence of grandparents provided some initial security against urban risks.

In the first few years of selling, Mr. F had no future plan; he did not know what he wanted to learn or do. However, as street life became increasingly difficult due to the policy of cleaning up urban centers, he began to think seriously about the next step. After studying travel guidebooks by himself, he became an unofficial tour guide for foreign backpackers. He also sought help for getting a driver's license (he received the money but sent it to the grandparents instead of going to the driving school).

Mr. F was caught by police this summer. Since he tested positive in heroin, he is now detained in one of the drug addiction centers in Ba Vi. People like him can be locked up for as many as two years. Some say that this is not too bad for him since he can be treated and has something to eat there. But all agree that many former addicts start using heroin again upon release. His sister, who married another seller recently, sometimes visits him in Ba Vi.

### **5.2. How to guide street children towards the right paths**

The solution to the street children problem, which must be detailed and realistic, needs to be discussed in full elsewhere. This section only presents some general suggestions which can be obtained directly from the above analysis. Three mutually related points are given below.

First, a proper mix of current protection and future investment should be available to each street child. The program to create appropriate conditions must be designed and provided strategically and systematically for each street child. This requires deep understanding and rich experience regarding the street children problem. Assistance should not be casual or ad hoc.

Second, for every group of street children, proper external intervention is required since it is very difficult for the child alone to overcome the barriers to progress. Even in a relatively “easy” case of Group III (economic migrants) with appropriate mindset, like Miss B above, help from foreigners and fellow Vietnamese were indispensable. For children in Groups I and II, external assistance is even more necessary for guiding them toward the right paths.

Third, for good intervention, analysis and planning based on an effective classification of street children is crucial. As mentioned earlier, street children are not homogeneous. Each child faces a different situation and requires a different help. Assistance must be consistent with the type and needs of children. Partial or unsuitable support will not only fail to achieve results but also waste the time and money of the supporters.

In this regard, Group I (broken family) is most difficult to assist. Children in this group generally lack necessary attitude and discipline. Therefore, they require all-round, long-term and customized commitment, encouragement, and patience on the part of help providers for both current protection and future investment, and for physical and mental assistance.

The main barrier for children in Group II (mindset problem) is parent’s psychology. As this is difficult to change even with constant persuasion, a special tactic to provide children with an education opportunity is needed. This may require financial incentive for the parent or even temporary separation of the child from the parent. If the children themselves also have the wrong mindset, it is even more difficult to assist them.

Street children in Group III (economic migrants) need financial assistance. Unlike other groups, they are more often equipped with good motivation and family encouragement to overcome the poverty trap. For them, main assistance can be financial supplemented by proper counseling and monitoring. While they are the least difficult group to help, careful selection is extremely important. Not all Group III children are honest or highly motivated, so the time and money of the supporters should be allocated to the most serious candidates.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

The plight of street children in Vietnam is at an early stage in comparison with more “developed” neighboring countries like Thailand. Many street children in Thailand organize gang groups and often have to resort to violence to survive. In Vietnam, by contrast, mafia-like crime groups of street children are relatively rare. Here, street

children just produce a feeling of pity and sadness in the minds of general public rather than strong fear and repulsion. If there are some street kids involved in social evils, we often consider them as the victims of those evils rather than evil makers. We need to effectively tackle the street children problem in Vietnam as soon as possible before it develops into the situation like Thailand.

Studying the interactions of old and new causes in a growing economy is just the starting point of street children research. For simplicity, we did not want to raise too many issues or questions in this paper although the reality is far more complex. Before closing, we would like to leave a few suggestions for further study. Street children themselves and many social program coordinators agree that there are two important issues that must be addressed seriously. First, there is a need to strengthen our skill in providing counseling work to the children in guiding each child to the right path. Second, after receiving certain education or training, children need additional help in applying their acquired knowledge to the real situation. A training program or a short course is not sufficient. They need more incentive and assistance to secure a stable job and build a family—to live a normal life in the society.

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