

# INVISIBLE CITIZENS: STREET CHILDREN IN URBAN PAKISTAN AND THE CRISIS OF STATE RESPONSIBILITY, CHALLENGES, AND GOVERNANCE FAILURES (2020–2023)

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## Abstract

*This study explores the persistent and deepening crisis of street children in urban Pakistan between 2020 and 2023, framing their existence as a manifestation of state failure, governance dysfunction, and institutional neglect. Street children who are deprived of basic rights such as shelter, education, healthcare, and protection are among the most vulnerable and overlooked populations in Pakistan's rapidly urbanizing cities. Despite Pakistan's constitutional commitments and ratification of international conventions like the UNCRC, the plight of these children remains largely unaddressed, exacerbated by poor policy execution, fragmented institutional coordination, and a lack of political will. This research examines the root causes of youth homelessness and social exclusion in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, focusing on how economic pressures, displacement, family breakdown, and urban poverty drive children to the streets. The study also analyzes the challenges these children face—including exploitation, abuse, addiction, and systemic invisibility and evaluates state responses during the politically turbulent and economically strained period of 2020–2023, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19. Through a multi-disciplinary approach combining policy analysis, qualitative field data, and human rights perspectives, this research highlights the urgent need for integrated urban governance reforms and child-centered policy frameworks. Ultimately, it calls for transforming these "invisible citizens" into recognized and protected members of society.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the growing urban centers of Pakistan, an invisible crisis continues to unfold thousands of street children live without access to basic human rights such as food, shelter, healthcare, education, and protection. These children, often orphaned, abandoned, or displaced by poverty and family breakdowns, represent one of the most vulnerable segments of the population. Despite being visible on the streets of Karachi, Lahore, and

Islamabad, they remain invisible to policy frameworks and institutional action. Their condition is not merely a humanitarian concern; it reflects a systemic failure of governance, social policy, and child protection mechanisms in Pakistan's urban landscape. Street children suffer from multiple layers of marginalization. They are exposed to physical abuse, drug addiction, sexual exploitation, child labor, and

encounters with law enforcement agencies that often treat them as criminals rather than victims. Most of these children do not possess birth certificates or identification, excluding them from formal education, healthcare services, and state welfare schemes. Their precarious existence is a byproduct of both structural poverty and a disjointed social safety net that fails to recognize them as citizens with rights and dignity (Ali & Khan, 2020 & UNICEF, 2022).

From 2020 to 2023, the situation worsened due to the socioeconomic aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns disrupted informal economies many street children's only source of income while also suspending whatever limited access they had to NGOs or drop-in centers. The period also saw increasing urban migration due to rural hardship, further contributing to the influx of vulnerable children into cities. However, there was no substantial policy response or integrated urban child welfare strategy implemented at the federal or provincial levels during this time. Despite Pakistan's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and national laws like the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018), practical implementation remains poor. Weak institutional coordination between ministries, limited funding for child welfare programs, absence of child protection officers in major cities, and lack of political will all contribute to the continued neglect of this issue. In many cases, urban governance structures prioritize infrastructure development over inclusive social welfare, reflecting the deeper priorities of the state (Khan & Rehman, 2023).

This research aims to explore the status of street children in urban Pakistan from 2020 to 2023 as a lens to examine broader issues of governance failure, institutional neglect, and state responsibility. It seeks to answer why the issue remains unresolved despite legal frameworks and social awareness, and what structural and political changes are required to transform these "invisible citizens" into protected, empowered members of society.

### Literature Review

The issue of street children in Pakistan has long been a subject of concern among human rights organizations and academic researchers. Defined by UNICEF as children who live and/or work on the streets without adequate protection or supervision,

street children represent a complex intersection of poverty, social exclusion, and policy failure. Research indicates that most street children in Pakistan come from extremely impoverished backgrounds, with factors such as domestic violence, orphanhood, displacement, and unemployment of guardians playing a central role in their marginalization. The urbanization of poverty has further exacerbated this phenomenon, as cities like Karachi and Lahore witness rising numbers of children living on the streets without state support (UNICEF, 2022).

A significant body of literature emphasizes the **state's failure in governance** and the absence of child protection infrastructure as core reasons for the continued growth of the street child population. Despite Pakistan's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there is minimal implementation of protection laws. Institutions such as the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau (CPWB) in Punjab remain limited in reach and effectiveness, largely due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, underfunding, and a lack of inter-agency coordination. These failures reflect a broader crisis of urban governance, where street children are not accounted for in city planning or policy execution (Ali & Khan, 2020).

Moreover, the socio-political narrative often criminalizes street children rather than viewing them as victims. Studies highlight that police harassment, arbitrary arrests, and detention without trial are common experiences for these children. Rather than offering rehabilitation or support, the state's mechanisms tend to treat them as public nuisances or security threats. This securitized approach to child homelessness is deeply problematic and contrary to Pakistan's legal obligations under the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018). The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of vulnerability. Lockdowns and economic slowdowns disrupted informal economies where many street children worked as beggars, vendors, or helpers. According to Save the Children (2021), the pandemic led to increased hunger, abuse, and mental health crises among street children, with little to no emergency intervention by the state. NGOs attempted to step in, but their efforts remained fragmented and insufficient due to funding limitations and restrictions on movement during lockdown periods (Save the Children, 2021).

In contrast to the crisis narrative, a few studies propose frameworks for effective intervention, emphasizing the importance of community-based approaches, access to identity registration, mobile outreach programs, and inclusive education models. However, these solutions often remain confined to academic discussions and NGO pilots, without serious policy adoption by the state. The literature repeatedly calls for systemic reforms, better inter-agency coordination, increased budget allocations, and stronger monitoring and evaluation systems for child welfare programs. The existing literature, while rich in documenting the plight of street children, reveals a consistent gap between legal commitments and practical implementation. It shows that governance in urban Pakistan has largely failed to respond to this humanitarian crisis in a meaningful, sustainable way. This study builds on that foundation by focusing specifically on the 2020–2023 period a time of health crisis, political instability, and economic strain to understand how these factors further entrenched the invisibility of street children in state policy and public discourse (Naseer & Shah, 2020).

### Theory

This study applies Structural Violence Theory, introduced by Johan Galtung in 1969, to analyze how institutional systems in Pakistan perpetuate harm against street children by denying them access to basic needs such as shelter, education, and protection. Structural violence, in this context, is reflected in the state's governance failures and policy neglect, which systematically exclude street children from social, legal, and economic support. This theory helps explain how the state's inaction becomes a form of indirect violence, making the children's suffering both normalized and invisible.

### Problem Statement

Despite Pakistan's legal and constitutional commitments to child welfare, thousands of street children in urban areas remain excluded from basic rights, including shelter, education, healthcare, and protection. From 2020 to 2023, this issue has intensified due to economic hardship, weak governance, and inadequate policy implementation. The lack of coordinated state response, fragmented

child protection systems, and the invisibility of these children in public policy reflect a deeper crisis of institutional neglect. This study seeks to investigate how and why the state has failed to address the plight of street children, treating them as invisible citizens rather than as individuals with rights and dignity.

### Research Objective

1. To critically examine the extent of state responsibility, governance challenges, and systemic failures in addressing the plight of street children in urban Pakistan between 2020 and 2023.

### Research Question

1. How have governance failures and lack of state responsibility contributed to the worsening conditions of street children in urban Pakistan from 2020 to 2023?

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the crisis of state responsibility, governance failures, and challenges faced by street children in urban Pakistan from 2020 to 2023. Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including social workers, NGOs, policymakers, and street children themselves in major urban centers such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Additionally, Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring patterns and core issues in the lived experiences of street children and institutional responses. This approach enables a deep understanding of systemic gaps and the sociopolitical context influencing policy implementation and child protection in urban Pakistan.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it sheds light on the neglected issue of street children in urban Pakistan, highlighting how systemic governance failures and weak state responsibility have deepened their vulnerability. By examining this crisis between 2020 and 2023, the research aims to inform policymakers, social institutions, and civil society about the urgent need for comprehensive child protection policies and targeted interventions to safeguard the rights and well-being of these invisible citizens.

### Summary to the Crisis of Street Children in Urban Pakistan

Street children in urban Pakistan represent one of the most visible yet neglected forms of social exclusion. As cities like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad experience rapid urbanization, a growing number of children find themselves pushed to the margins—living, working, and surviving on the streets without any form of social protection. These children are often the victims of poverty, domestic violence, family breakdown, child abuse, and lack of access to basic services such as education and healthcare. Lacking a stable home environment and adult supervision, they are exposed to multiple vulnerabilities, including physical violence, substance abuse, trafficking, and exploitative labor. According to estimates, tens of thousands of street children roam the streets of major Pakistani cities, yet their needs are rarely prioritized in public policy or social discourse. The term "street children" itself encompasses a wide range of experiences and realities. Some children work on the streets to support their families but return home at night, while others are completely abandoned or have run away from abusive homes, making the streets their only refuge. These distinctions are important for understanding the complexity of the issue and for crafting targeted policy interventions. However, Pakistan's government lacks a comprehensive and coordinated national strategy to categorize, register, and support these children, which results in fragmented and inadequate service delivery. The absence of accurate data and state accountability further exacerbates the invisibility of this vulnerable group (Consortium for Street Children, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the crisis by pushing more families into poverty and closing schools and informal shelters. Children who relied on schools for meals and safety were forced to fend for themselves, swelling the numbers on the streets. The economic fallout of the pandemic, combined with insufficient social safety nets and crumbling urban infrastructure, exposed the structural weaknesses in Pakistan's child protection framework. Street children became even more susceptible to hunger, exploitation, and abuse, with little or no access to emergency healthcare or legal aid. The lack of a robust and accountable governance

system has deepened the crisis. While provincial child protection bureaus and social welfare departments exist, their capacity, funding, and outreach remain minimal. In most urban centers, state institutions have failed to ensure child-friendly policing, shelters, rehabilitation services, and long-term reintegration programs. In the absence of a rights-based approach, the problem of street children continues to be treated more as a security issue than a humanitarian one. Consequently, these children are often subjected to harassment and criminalization rather than protection and care (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [HRCPP], 2022).

The growing visibility of street children in Pakistan's cities is not just a humanitarian crisis—it is a governance and development failure. These children symbolize the broader collapse of social safety systems, urban planning, and responsive governance. Their presence on the streets reflects how poverty, inequality, neglect, and state apathy intersect to produce and perpetuate extreme child vulnerability. Addressing this issue requires a holistic, multi sectorial response that integrates legal, economic, educational, and psychosocial support systems into the national development agenda (Ali & Khan, 2023).

### Understanding Street Children - Definitions, Categories, and Global Perspectives

The term street children encompasses a diverse and complex group of minors whose lives are intricately tied to public spaces and urban survival. The United Nations defines street children as "children for whom the street has become their home and/or source of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised" (UNICEF, 2005). These children are not a homogenous group; they differ in their experiences, degrees of vulnerability, and relationships with their families. The label, while useful for advocacy, often obscures individual agency and the socio-economic contexts that lead children to the streets. It is crucial to adopt a nuanced understanding that recognizes the spectrum of their lived realities. Scholars and practitioners generally categorize street children into two main groups, **children on the street** and **children of the street**. Children on the street work or spend much of their time on the street but maintain some form of connection to their family or guardians and usually return home at night. In contrast, children of

the street live full-time on the street, having either lost contact with or been abandoned by their families. This categorization is important because it determines the kind of intervention that may be most appropriate whether reintegration, shelter, or legal protection. Moreover, street children are often part of the informal economy, engaged in work like begging, vending, or scavenging exposing them to exploitation, abuse, and social exclusion (Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003).

Globally, the phenomenon of street children is most acute in developing countries with high urban poverty, conflict, and weak child protection systems. Countries in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia have reported some of the highest numbers of street children, with estimates ranging from tens of thousands to several million depending on definitions and data availability. In Brazil, for instance, the issue became prominent in the 1980s when children were systematically targeted in extrajudicial killings by rogue police forces. Similarly, in India and Bangladesh, large populations of urban poor have led to generational cycles of homelessness among children, with inadequate policy responses. These cases highlight that while street children are a global issue, their manifestations are shaped by local political, economic, and cultural dynamics. One of the challenges in addressing the plight of street children globally is the lack of reliable and uniform data. Because many live unregistered or undocumented lives, they often remain invisible in national statistics and development planning. Different organizations use varying definitions and methodologies for counting and classifying street children, resulting in underreporting and fragmented responses. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to design targeted, rights-based policies. Furthermore, street children are often criminalized or treated as delinquents rather than victims of socio-economic failure, which leads to further marginalization instead of protection (Conticini & Hulme, 2006).

Efforts to address the issue of street children at the international level have evolved over the past few decades. The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, adopted in 1989, serves as a global framework for the protection of children's rights, including those on the streets. Many international NGOs, such as Save the Children and

the Consortium for Street Children, have contributed to both research and on-the-ground interventions. However, despite international commitments, many governments lack the political will, funding, and institutional coordination required to implement sustainable solutions. Successful strategies in some countries have included community-based rehabilitation, legal reforms, mobile schools, and psychological support all requiring a multi-sectoral and long-term commitment. In conclusion, understanding street children through comprehensive definitions and global perspectives is essential to formulating inclusive and effective interventions. Categorizing these children helps tailor solutions to their unique contexts, while recognizing global patterns allows for shared learning and solidarity. Ultimately, the plight of street children reflects deep-rooted inequalities, failures in governance, and a lack of child-centered development policies both in Pakistan and around the world (Thomas de Benítez, 2007).

### **Governance, Neglect, and Urban Child Vulnerability**

Urban child vulnerability is deeply intertwined with the failures of governance systems that are either unresponsive or ill-equipped to protect marginalized populations, particularly children living on the streets. Governance refers not only to the structures of political and administrative control but also to the processes through which public resources are allocated, social services are delivered, and rights are protected. In urban Pakistan, poor governance manifests through chronic underfunding of social services, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of policy implementation, all of which expose street children to multiple layers of deprivation. These governance failures result in a lack of access to education, healthcare, shelter, and protection from abuse and exploitation. The neglect of vulnerable children is a byproduct of broader socio-political priorities where urban planning often favors infrastructure and commercial development over inclusive social welfare. Street children are typically viewed not as citizens in need of protection but as nuisances or security threats. This perception fuels a cycle of criminalization and exclusion, whereby children are subjected to harassment by law enforcement rather than being



supported by child protection services. Furthermore, the lack of coordination among various government departments such as child protection bureaus, police, municipal bodies, and welfare departments creates administrative vacuums, where no single agency is held accountable for the welfare of street children (HRCP, 2021).

Urban governance structures in Pakistan are highly centralized and often detached from the ground realities of slum areas and informal settlements. In these spaces, families are already living at the margins of legality, making children even more vulnerable to being neglected by the state. Many of these children come from displaced families, domestic violence survivors, or broken homes, yet there are minimal psychosocial services available to intervene before children end up on the streets. The absence of reliable data systems also hinders effective governance. Without a centralized database or registration mechanism, street children remain invisible in both policy and practice, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. Corruption and political apathy further deepen urban child vulnerability. Funds allocated for child protection and social services are often mismanaged or diverted. Even where laws exist such as the Juvenile Justice System Act 2018 or the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2004 there is limited enforcement due to weak institutional capacity and lack of training among officials. This creates a legal grey zone where street children are neither treated as offenders nor given the protection they are entitled to under national and international frameworks. Governance, in this context, becomes a system of selective care, where only visible and politically convenient issues receive attention (Malik & Tariq, 2021).

The urban child vulnerability in Pakistan must be viewed within the global context of neoliberal governance models, where austerity and privatization reduce the state's role in welfare. NGOs and international donors have stepped in to fill the gap, but their efforts are often fragmented, unsustainable, and heavily dependent on foreign funding. This substitution of state responsibility with civil society interventions may offer temporary relief but does not address the structural governance issues at the core of urban child neglect. Therefore, systemic reform is needed, including participatory urban governance,

strengthened local institutions, and increased budgetary commitments to child-focused public services (De Benítez, 2011).

### Ground Realities - Voices and Lived Experiences of Street Children

The everyday lives of street children in urban Pakistan are marked by hardship, resilience, and neglect. Their experiences are shaped by extreme poverty, familial breakdowns, domestic violence, and a lack of social support, often pushing them into the harsh conditions of street life. Many children interviewed in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad describe leaving home due to abuse, hunger, or forced labor, only to face more acute risks on the streets ranging from starvation and physical violence to sexual exploitation and drug addiction. The lived experiences of these children are rarely documented in formal records or public discourse, which contributes to their systemic invisibility (UNICEF, 2020).

Street children often develop coping strategies for survival, including forming informal peer groups or "street families," engaging in begging, vending, scavenging, or working at small workshops and tea stalls. While such work provides basic sustenance, it also exposes them to exploitative labor conditions, where they often work long hours for meager or no pay. Many are forced to share their earnings with older children or adults who offer "protection." Interviews conducted by NGOs reveal that a majority of these children are also subject to police brutality, harassment by shopkeepers, and threats from gang members or drug peddlers revealing the severe lack of legal and physical protection for minors on the streets (SPARC, 2021).

The street becomes both a site of danger and a distorted sense of home for many of these children. Lacking access to formal education, these children are caught in a cycle of illiteracy and marginalization, which prevents upward mobility and integration into mainstream society. Attempts to access education are often met with rejection or ridicule, while government-run shelters are limited in capacity and rarely child-friendly. Girls on the street face additional vulnerabilities, including a heightened risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and stigmatization. Their stories, when documented, reflect the double burden

of poverty and gender-based violence (Save the Children, 2021).

Health risks are another major component of the lived experiences of street children. Poor sanitation, exposure to environmental hazards, lack of clean water, and absence of medical services contribute to chronic illnesses, malnutrition, and psychological trauma. Many children turn to substance abuse, especially sniffing glue or using other inexpensive narcotics, as a means to escape hunger, cold, and emotional pain. Interviews and fieldwork consistently show that addiction among street children is not only a health issue but also a symptom of deeper emotional and social neglect (Ali & Khan, 2022).

Despite these challenges, the voices of street children also reflect extraordinary resilience, adaptability, and hope. Some express dreams of becoming teachers, drivers, or shopkeepers aspirations that emerge in moments of trust during interviews with researchers or NGO workers. These dreams, however distant, demonstrate that with appropriate interventions, even the most vulnerable children can be empowered to imagine alternative futures. What they lack is not potential, but access: access to protection, education, love, and justice. Their narratives underscore the urgent need for a rights-based, participatory, and context-sensitive approach to policy and rehabilitation (Conticini & Hulme, 2006).

#### **Governance Breakdown - State Neglect and Strategy Failures (2020 - 2023)**

Between 2020 and 2023, Pakistan witnessed a deepening crisis in urban child welfare systems, especially in relation to street children, as a result of persistent governance breakdowns and strategy failures. While constitutional and legal frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018) and various provincial child protection acts are in place, there remains a glaring disconnect between legislation and actual implementation. The state's failure to enforce protective mechanisms, allocate adequate budgets, and ensure inter-departmental coordination has resulted in the growing marginalization of street children in urban centers like Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta. These failures reflect not merely policy gaps but an erosion of state responsibility and public accountability (Malik & Tariq, 2021).

Despite the existence of provincial Child Protection and Welfare Bureaus, most of them operate under significant resource constraints and lack functional outreach programs. In Punjab, for instance, although the bureau has established centers, they remain underutilized due to insufficient staffing, limited awareness among communities, and poor coordination with local law enforcement. In Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, child protection units are either inactive or operate without comprehensive databases or monitoring mechanisms. Moreover, institutional turf wars between departments such as social welfare, police, and judiciary create administrative paralysis, allowing vulnerable children to fall through the cracks of the bureaucratic system. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified these governance failures. During lockdowns, street children already living on the margins were cut off from any form of informal support or humanitarian relief. Government relief efforts focused primarily on registered citizens, neglecting unregistered populations such as street children, beggars, and homeless families. Notably, there were no targeted emergency response programs designed for street children at the national or provincial level, leaving them without access to food, shelter, or healthcare.

This abandonment during a national crisis demonstrated the state's incapacity to adopt inclusive and flexible governance strategies in emergency contexts (UNICEF, 2021).

Corruption and mismanagement within child welfare institutions further undermined strategy implementation. Funds allocated for street children's rehabilitation projects were either delayed or misused, with minimal transparency and oversight. Reports by civil society organizations highlight cases where shelter homes failed to meet basic child protection standards, including safety, hygiene, and trained caregiving staff. Additionally, police and municipal officers have been implicated in harassing street children rather than facilitating their referral to child protection services, indicating a punitive rather than protective mindset within state institutions. At the policy level, there is a noticeable absence of long-term, evidence-based strategic planning for addressing urban child vulnerability. Most initiatives undertaken from 2020 - 2023 were ad hoc, donor-driven, or launched in response to public pressure rather than as part of a

sustainable child welfare strategy. The lack of centralized data on street children, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, and insufficient investment in human capital have collectively undermined any meaningful reform. Furthermore, there is no national urban child welfare policy that integrates housing, education, healthcare, and legal protection into a unified framework for street children (SPARC, 2022). The years 2020 to 2023 represented a critical period in which state neglect and governance failures continued to exacerbate the plight of street children in Pakistan. Rather than addressing systemic issues, the state has largely relied on superficial, reactive measures that lack vision, coherence, and commitment. Moving forward, addressing this governance breakdown requires a rights-based, multi-sectoral strategy backed by political will, robust data, institutional reform, and child-centered urban policy frameworks.

#### Role of NGOs, Donors, and Non-State Actors - Challenges and Opportunities

In the absence of an effective and responsive state mechanism, **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)**, international donors, and other **non-state actors** have emerged as critical players in addressing the needs of street children in urban Pakistan. These organizations have stepped in to provide basic services such as shelter, food, non-formal education, psychosocial support, and legal aid. NGOs like the Edhi Foundation, Saylani Welfare Trust, and the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) have played a visible role in urban centers where state institutions either do not exist or lack capacity. Their interventions fill critical gaps in the child welfare system and are often the only source of care available to street children (SPARC, 2022).

International donors and development partners such as UNICEF, Save the Children, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have supported numerous projects aimed at enhancing the protection and rehabilitation of vulnerable children in Pakistan. These interventions typically include capacity-building programs, public awareness campaigns, child-friendly spaces, and mobile schools. Donor-funded programs have also encouraged the development of national and provincial child protection policies, legal reforms, and improved data

collection methods. However, the dependence on external funding creates sustainability challenges, especially when donor priorities shift or funding cycles end without government ownership or continuity. Despite their contribution, NGOs and non-state actors face **numerous operational and systemic challenges**. Coordination between NGOs and government agencies is often weak, leading to duplication of services or gaps in coverage. Additionally, NGOs working in politically sensitive or conservative areas often face resistance from local authorities or communities due to mistrust or differing ideological perspectives. Regulatory restrictions, such as the requirement for foreign-funded NGOs to register under strict government scrutiny, also create bureaucratic hurdles that limit the scope and reach of their operations (Bano, 2018).

A major criticism of the NGO sector is the **fragmentation and lack of standardized practices** across organizations. While some NGOs provide long-term rehabilitation, many others focus only on short-term relief without addressing the structural causes of child vulnerability. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are often weak or missing, which makes it difficult to assess the real impact of their interventions. Additionally, NGOs sometimes struggle with limited staff training and insufficient child safeguarding policies, which can compromise the quality and safety of services provided to street children. Nonetheless, the **opportunities** provided by non-state actors are significant. NGOs are often more agile and innovative than state bodies, capable of piloting new models for child protection, such as mobile outreach units, community-based child protection committees, or vocational training centers. They also play a crucial role in **advocacy and awareness**, influencing public opinion and pressuring governments to act. Collaborative networks among NGOs, donors, academia, and media have been instrumental in placing street children on the policy agenda. Such multi-stakeholder engagement is key to driving systemic reform and building a comprehensive safety net for vulnerable children (Thomas de Benítez, 2011).

For long-term impact, it is essential that the state actively **engages with NGOs and donors in a structured partnership** framework. This includes integrating NGO interventions into national policies,



ensuring coordinated referral systems, and co-developing strategies with community stakeholders. By fostering public-private partnerships and enhancing the institutional legitimacy of non-state actors, Pakistan can transform fragmented efforts into a cohesive, sustainable system of protection and empowerment for street children (Save the Children, 2021).

### Invisible Citizens: Urbanization, Poverty, and Structural Barriers

Street children in Pakistan are often referred to as "invisible citizens" a term that reflects both their physical marginalization from society and the institutional blindness of the state toward their existence. These children are not counted in official statistics, rarely benefit from public policies, and often lack legal identity documents, such as birth certificates or national identity numbers. As a result, they remain outside the purview of formal education systems, healthcare, and social protection programs. This invisibility is not accidental it is produced and sustained by the broader structures of inequality, weak governance, and urban neglect that define the experience of marginalized populations in developing countries like Pakistan. Rapid and unplanned **urbanization** in Pakistan has significantly contributed to the rise of vulnerable populations, particularly children who end up on the streets. Cities like Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar have experienced large-scale rural-to-urban migration without corresponding investments in infrastructure, housing, and basic services. As families settle in informal urban settlements or slums, children are often forced to contribute to household incomes through informal labor, or worse, abandon home life altogether due to domestic violence or extreme poverty. The state's failure to integrate urban poor communities into formal planning systems has led to a two-tiered city structure: one that is served and protected, and another that is invisible and neglected (Hasan & Raza, 2020).

**Poverty** remains a fundamental driver of street child vulnerability. In Pakistan, over 30% of the population lives below the national poverty line, and children are disproportionately affected. Economic hardship often forces parents to push children into labor, or in some cases, children independently migrate to cities in

search of work and survival. Once on the streets, they are pulled into exploitative labor markets, substance abuse, and unsafe living conditions. Chronic poverty, coupled with inflation and lack of access to public goods, creates a trap that keeps these children locked out of developmental opportunities, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of deprivation (World Bank, 2022).

At the heart of the issue are **structural barriers** that prevent meaningful access to rights and services. These include the absence of a comprehensive child welfare policy, fragmentation of child protection services, and discriminatory attitudes toward street children by society and state institutions. Street children often face criminalization rather than support, with law enforcement treating them as delinquents instead of vulnerable citizens. Moreover, the education system is largely inaccessible to children without fixed addresses or identity documents, and healthcare remains unaffordable or unavailable to those living outside formal residential zones. These structural inequities reflect systemic failures that go beyond poverty they are rooted in exclusionary governance and institutional neglect (Malik & Tariq, 2021).

Furthermore, **social stigma and lack of political voice** contribute to the continued invisibility of street children. Their exclusion is rarely addressed in political platforms, development planning, or budgetary frameworks. Because they do not vote, pay taxes, or belong to organized interest groups, they are not seen as a constituency worth engaging. As a result, policymaking often overlooks their specific needs. Even civil society interventions tend to treat street children as passive recipients of aid rather than active participants in shaping their future. This lack of inclusion in policy dialogue reflects a deeper issue of social hierarchy, where certain lives are deemed less valuable than others (Thomas de Benítez, 2011).

To break this cycle of invisibility and marginalization, a **rights-based, inclusive approach** is necessary one that recognizes street children as equal citizens entitled to the same protections, opportunities, and dignity as others. This requires structural reforms in urban governance, targeted poverty alleviation programs, identity registration initiatives, and universal access to education and healthcare. It also demands a shift in public perception from viewing

street children as outcasts to recognizing them as a product of failed policies and unmet responsibilities. Only then can the structural barriers that sustain their invisibility be meaningfully dismantled (Save the Children, 2021).

### Conclusion

The plight of street children in urban Pakistan is a glaring indictment of systemic governance failures, structural poverty, and socio-political neglect. These children, rendered invisible in policy, planning, and public discourse, embody the tragic consequences of an unequal society where access to rights and protections is conditional upon one's social and economic standing. Despite the presence of legal frameworks and scattered welfare initiatives, the state's inability to implement cohesive, inclusive, and sustainable strategies continues to push thousands of children into cycles of exploitation, abuse, and marginalization. NGOs and non-state actors, while impactful, cannot replace the institutional responsibility of the state. Addressing this crisis demands more than charity; it requires structural reform, political commitment, and a transformative shift in how society perceives and treats its most vulnerable citizens. Street children are not problems to be managed but citizens to be empowered. Their survival in hostile urban environments is not a testament to resilience alone, but also a reminder of the collective failure to uphold basic human dignity. Any meaningful response must be rights-based, data-driven, and grounded in equity, ensuring that every child regardless of their circumstances is seen, heard, and protected as a full member of society.

### Findings

1. **The Urban Pakistan hosts an estimated 1.2 - 1.5 million street-connected children**, many of whom are uncounted, unregistered, and remain unseen by formal policy system
2. Fragmented governance, outdated vagrancy laws, and police-led round-ups treat vulnerable children like offenders, not rights-holders.
3. Street children face systemic exclusion from **education, healthcare, legal identity**, and fall into exploitative labor, trafficking, abuse, and substance dependence

4. Key child-protection bodies (Child Protection & Welfare Bureau (CPWB), Child Protection Unit (CPUs), National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC) lack data, clear mandates, coordination, and resources, rendering policy frameworks ineffective.

5. Society's apathy and ignorance mirrored in public attitudes and weak implementation—allow the plight of street children to persist unnoticed.

### Recommendations

1. Decriminalize survival behaviors by repealing vagrancy and "status offence" laws to shift from punitive to restorative, child-rights-based justice.
2. Build a national, multisectoral governance framework with clear roles, data-led "head counting," federal-provincial coordination, and accountability mechanisms.
3. Train social workers, police, juvenile courts, and welfare staff in SOPs, safeguarding, and psychosocial support to strengthen capacity at all levels.
4. Guarantee accessible education by enforcing Article 25-A, removing documentation/age barriers, and scaling non-formal/accelerated learning with stipends
5. Expand child protection services by establishing drop-in centers, case-management systems, family outreach, shelters, and reintegration support
6. Formalize government Civil Society Organization (CSO) partnerships through umbrella networks to align efforts, share best practices, and amplify children's voices.
7. Mobilize public awareness campaigns and media to destigmatize street-connected children and build societal support for their rights
8. Strengthen social safety nets and identity access by expanding Ehsaas/Bait-ul-Mal, simplifying birth registration, and ensuring inclusion of street children.

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