



Resilient Systems supporting Street Youth to meet their Basic Needs

2REST

**RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RESILIENCE EMBEDDED IN STREET TEMPORALITIES:
MAPPING STREET YOUTH LIVED RESILIENCES
THROUGH ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY DATA**

Key points

- This brief highlights **Risks and Resources** around around basic needs resilience from **data collected with street youth** in three African cities.
- **Basic needs** represent the fundamental human needs and rights for enough **food, shelter, and safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)** – essential to health and livelihoods.
- **Lack of food** left street youth in a ‘**hunger trap**’ – a cycle of poverty, hunger, stigma, illness from poor food, risky work, and negative community relations, exacerbated by lack of shelter and WASH..
- **street youth** are forced to engage in **constrained problem-solving strategies** and exploitative forms of work to meet their basic needs.
- **Resources** that support street youth revealed a reliance on personal resilience factors, such as perseverance, and peer and community support.
- **NGOs and civil society organisations** such as churches sometimes provide food, clothing, and shelter.
- There is an **urgent need for comprehensive state support systems** that enable rather than undermine street youth as they meet their basic needs.
- **2REST recommends a comprehensive combination of multisystemic resources** that fulfils state obligations and works with street youth to help them meet their basic needs.



Introduction

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About *Growing up on the Streets* and 2REST

2REST analysed secondary data from the project [*Growing up on the Streets*](#) using a **multisystemic resilience framework**. This framework of **risks** and **resources** goes beyond individual resilience to show how multiple systems can be involved in helping young people in their daily lives.

[*Growing up on the Streets*](#) was a participatory longitudinal research project conducted with 229 street youth in Accra, Ghana, Bukavu, DRC, and Harare, Zimbabwe between 2012 and 2020. The quotes and data here are from **street youth research assistants** in the three cities who observed their peers and reported what life was like on the streets.

This brief summarises the analysis of risks and resources relating to basic needs resilience, mapping street youth resources and making recommendations for multisystemic system support to contribute to the lived resilience of street youth.

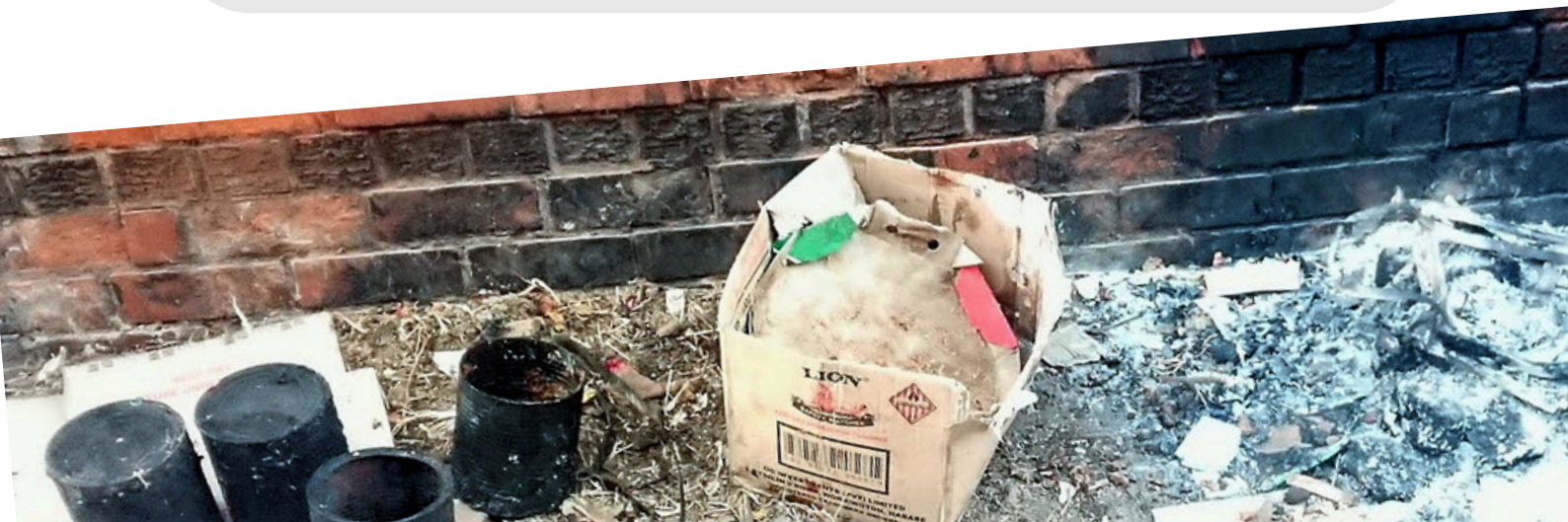
- For more information see [*Growing up on the Streets*](#) briefing on on [Food](#), [Shelter](#), [Health and Wellbeing](#) and 2REST Policy Briefing on Health).
- Check out story maps made with street youth: with sections on the challenges of meeting their basic needs during the pandemic and beyond in [Harare](#); finding food in [Bukavu](#), and finding shelter, and enough to eat in [Accra](#).

What is 'multisystemic' resilience?

Personal factors are important to resilience, such as biological and psychological resources of good physical and mental health, intelligence, and determination. 2REST recognises that other factors are also key, applying this to the lives of street youth:

- **Social factors:** e.g. trusted adults, enabling peers, street families, family networks.
- **Institutional factors:** e.g. street work services, markets, or medical clinics.
- **Physical environment factors:** e.g. adequate shelter, safe food, safe spaces.

This re-conceptualisation combines factors and is termed **multisystemic resilience** (Ungar and Theron, 2020).



The right to basic needs for street youth

The rights to basic needs in Africa are supported by key regional frameworks. **The Banjul Charter** emphasises that economic progress is dependent on the fulfilment of health and education rights; all linked to an adequate standard of living (OAU, 1981, Articles 16–24). The **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child** includes the provision of adequate nutrition and safe drinking water, clothing and housing (OAU, 1990, Articles 14 and 20).

Similar rights are enshrined in **international law**. The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** states that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and wellbeing (UDHR, 1948: 76, Article 25), including **adequate food, clothing, and housing** (ICESCR, 1966: 4, Article 11). Through **UN General Comment 21**, UNCRC has clarified this means providing direct assistance to children in street situations (UNGC21: 17, para 49).

Recent strategic documents and frameworks place people at the centre of sustainable development for the Continent. **Agenda 2040** envisages an Africa in which “every child grows up well-nourished and with access to the basic necessities of life” and “no child is forced to beg for a living” (ACERWC, 2016: 27–29, Aspiration 5). Whilst **Agenda 2063** emphasizes the importance of ending poverty, improving housing with access to basic necessities of life – water, sanitation, electricity – and providing social security and protection (AUC, 2015, Aspiration 1.1).

UN General Comment 21 addresses specific obligations for states around street youth, including stopping forced evictions, including the demolition of informal settlements prior to providing adequate alternative accommodation (UNGC21: 17, para 49). States should provide access to housing that is secure, affordable, habitable and includes access to basic services, safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene facilities (UNGC21: 17, para 49; also, UNGC4, para 8).



Risks – 1

Lowlights around accessing basic needs – *Lack of Food*

Lack of food is at the root of a cycle of risks (see Figure) affecting street youth:

- **Hunger** drives young people to eat food from bins but rotten food leads to sickness. Goodwill, a street researcher in Harare, explains he “was vomiting. It is because of the food from the bins that we eat, the **food is dirty**.” Taurai, another Harare research assistant, explained that buying affordable food may be no better, as the food is “stale” resulting in “stomach aches and running stomachs.”
- **Poverty** drives young people in Accra to eat “boka”, cheap leftover food that is filling but leads to illness: Papa said that “after you have eaten it, you will have troubles.”
- **Young women** often single-handedly meet their own and their children’s basic needs, and struggle to find sufficient food for children or to sustain **breastfeeding**.
 - In Bukavu, research assistant Estelle had recently given birth but complained that she **did not get enough food to breastfeed her baby**: “I face the challenge of hunger... and that is why my breasts do not produce milk for my child to suck.”
 - Constance, a research assistant in Accra, explained: “you don’t get food to eat; you have to buy pampers, fetch water, buy charcoal; all these things, it is a problem”.
- **Hunger**, and the livelihood strategies street youth are forced into to avoid it, lead to **negative community relations**.
 - In Harare, boys **died from eating poisoned food left in bins**, and fear of eating poison prevented acceptance of donations.
 - **Hunger leads to breakdowns in peer support networks**, and lack of support and income (worse at weekends) affects newcomers particularly. This can lead to stealing and crime, further **diminishing community trust**.
 - In Bukavu and Harare **sex work was the only option for street girls** (and some boys in Harare), leading to stigma, illness, and pregnancy, all hindering their ability to work and meet their basic needs. Estelle felt she had “no choice because I am hungry and have to manage to get food”.
 - **Substance use** helps young people **cope** with the physical and psychological effects of **sex work**, to suppress **hunger**, or the **stigma** of accessing food from bins. Addiction leads to prioritizing spending on drugs over basic needs. Taurai in Harare describes how street girls and young women “get slim due to the items from the bins” and drink strong liquor “that affects their health”.



Risks – 2

Risks associated with lack of food in the lives of street youth cut across 2REST's multisystemic risk framework: Psychological, relational, health, institutional, socio-cultural, limited personal assets, and temporal risks come into play.

- **Despite great need, there is a lack of support from services:** While eating food from the bins is risky, it is the only way that street youth survive. In Harare, the council cleared bins to prevent young people scavenging for food.
- In Bukavu, Abdou reported a **lack of support from social welfare, international NGOs, the community**, saying "we have to manage to get food ourselves", complaining that "the authorities are useless to the street children. They do not defend or plead for us."
- Goodwill complained of **ineffective services** and NGOs that do not support street youth or are no longer providing food and washing facilities.

Risks around lack of food are complex. street youth can sometimes make enough money to meet their daily needs, but they have nowhere to store food or save money to ensure they can buy food the next day. 2REST summarise this cycle of risks around food poverty as 'The Hunger Trap':

Figure. 2REST's The Hunger Trap: Lack of food is at the root of a cycle of risks affecting street children and youth.



Lowlights around accessing basic needs – *Lack of Shelter*

- In Accra, informal settlements are regularly **destroyed by the authorities**. Many young people live in markets, setting up 'nets' made of sheets at night, but traders return early in the morning, so young people don't get enough **sleep**. Due to the destruction of the market by authorities, Myra sleeps "in the **rain** and the **cold**" with her baby son, who "is not even nine months old".
- In Harare, Goodwill's network slept in an alleyway, later taken over by a drugs seller. They slept with **cardboard or plastics**; if given blankets, they sell them before they are stolen. Taurai felt that "the issue of shelter is the most painful". For young women, lack of shelter impacts them as they **try to protect their babies from the rain and cold**. Violet must sleep "at the shops" as she "has a baby she needs to sleep at a dry place."

Risks – 3

- In Bukavu, Abdou's group slept in **open spaces**: canoes, verandas, toilets, showers and market stalls, exposing them to cold, mosquitoes, rain and illness. Street girls working in sex work were sometimes chased by older sex workers due to competition for costumers, losing shelter, income, food and access to WASH facilities, catching up on sleep in unsafe places like cars and toilets.
- **Without shelter**, both street youth in Bukavu were frequently exposed to violence by police: rape, beatings, confiscation of property, pouring of water on them, etc. This resulted in lack of sleep, injuries, arrests, psychological trauma. Nicaise explained: "the police who come to get money from us. If we don't have any, they beat us and take away our shoes".

Lowlights around accessing basic needs – *Lack of WASH*

Lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities is an unmet basic need that is compounded by lack of shelter and food.

- in Bukavu, living around the shores of Lake Kivu, without easy access to toilets or wash facilities, young men know that **the lake is used to access water and as a toilet**. Nicaise explained how he "vomited green water" because of the "lack of water to drink in the local area we sometimes drink the lake water."
- Estelle's group used "water from the Funu river" for **drinking, preparing meals and washing** their bodies (including after sex work), or occasionally paying for water from taps. Estelle noted defiantly: "we don't care about using and drinking dirty water because there is a saying which states that 'A Congolese never dies of microbes.'"
- In Accra, WASH facilities are **privately owned**, and street youth pay to go to shower and to the toilet, but Papa describes how one bowl of water is used for everyone to wash their hands. They can be **arrested** if caught going to the toilet in the open air.
- In Harare, Goodwill explained that **substance use** reduces the desire to keep clean: "after taking drugs they would not want to go bath". Further, lack of toothbrushes and WASH facilities leads to **poor oral hygiene**. This is exacerbated by substance use, as street youth drink sugary codeine-laced cough syrup, causing some street boys to lose several of their teeth.



Resources – 1

Basic needs resources adopted by street youth across systems

- **Physiological resources:** Age and gender shape available resources including sleeping spaces and survival strategies. Boys and girls engaged in informal work such as carrying loads and selling to get money to meet their basic needs. In Bukavu, boys helped in fishing tasks and in the slaughterhouse to get food.
- **Psychological resources:** Despite their daily circumstances, street youth demonstrate remarkable **resourcefulness and adaptability**. Street youth persevered, and shared positive emotions such as hopefulness about finding food and shelter during times of crisis.
 - **Cleanliness** and appearance are of cultural importance. In Accra, young people pay for a bucket of water and a cubicle if they can. Young people **became accustomed** to poor food, sleeping conditions, dirty water, skipping meals. They use their **communication skills** helped **build positive relationships with their community**. Street youth were equipped to sleep anywhere, as noted by Estelle: “I am like a tortoise that walks with its house”.
 - Some personal resources are exploitative or **constrained** and may affect their health in the longer term, for example, picking food from bins, or exchanging sex or labour for food or shelter, or adopting **problem-solving strategies**, such as timing when food is collected from bins to avoid poisoning or spoiling.
- **Community support:** Shop owners, market women, landlords, and bathhouse owners supplying food, clothing, and shelter, or purchasing goods from street youth. Some young people drew on their **faith** to sustain them emotionally and gain support from members of churches and mosques. In Accra, Papa built rapport with a bath house owner and was once allowed to wash on credit. In Harare, Taurai commented that “the youngsters are going to the church to get food... Some of us do not have anything but those in churches want to help us”. In Bukavu, young men would sometimes borrow a canoe from fishermen and collect safer water far from the shore.
- **Partner support:** Supportive partners fetch water and cook, provide food, clothing, and shelter.



Resources – 2

Basic needs resources adopted by street youth across systems

- **Peer support:** Peers showed **empathy, altruism, kindness** towards one another, sharing resources, **providing food and shelter** to those in need and collaborating to resist evictions. Constance said that: “when you are hungry and you don’t have money, we can give you food or provide a dress if you don’t have any.”
 - In Bukavu, Nicaise described how “in the morning we organized ourselves to see how we could eat together” agreeing “the activity each one will do and then each will choose to bring fish, flour... so, when we light the fire, some will be cooking”. Once ready, “in two minutes ‘a mountain’ of fufou* disappears.” (*starch-based dough common in Central or West African countries; southern African equivalents include sadza and pap).
 - In Harare young people got food from the market, or ate fruits from the bins, removing the spoilt parts and eating, or boiling the food first to kill germs. They sometimes cooked and shared food in their street ‘bases’.
- **Material resources** like **cooking utensils, savings, and clothing** provide some level of stability, but often depended on **reliable shelter or community help with storage** and savings. In Harare, some young people purchased cheap second-hand clothes in the market, changing their clothes ‘on the go’ to escape the challenges of lack of storage and WASH facilities.
- **Institutional resources** include initiatives such as **dialogues between police and street youth** to address shelter issues, and **support from NGOs and churches**, which provide food, clothing, and shelter. However, inconsistency and corruption within these organizations can pose challenges. In Accra, Constance reported how street youth and the community followed advice from the metropolitan authority about cleanliness: “we are being careful because of the cholera”.
- **Built environment resources:** Reliable water services and renovated spaces have occasionally provided stability. Other resources include second-hand clothing markets, and temporal knowledge about where to find food and shelter.
- **Blue and green spaces** (the lake, river, ocean, and open space) serve multiple purposes, including shelter, sources of water and food, washing, and safe storage of possessions.



Conclusion

street youth rely on an intricate web of **individual, relational, institutional, and environmental resources** to survive and meet their basic daily needs. **Their resilience is not solely a product of individual determination**; it is shaped by a variety of contributing factors within their social and systemic environments.

Beyond their personal resilience, **street youth primarily depend on individual and relational resources**, with significant support coming from community members. While institutional and ecological resources play a small role, support comes from charitable donations by churches and organizations such as NGOs. **State involvement is minimal and often counterproductive**, with actions largely limited to demolitions, clearances, and negative experiences of policing.

Persistent poverty and lack of financial resources force street youth to rely on **harmful coping mechanisms** such as consuming rotten or potentially poisoned food, and substance use, leading to malnutrition and illnesses. Additionally, **inadequate WASH facilities** pose serious public health risks, including the spread of cholera. The absence of shelter exposes young people to violence, sexual assault, harassment, and arrest, highlighting the **urgent need for comprehensive support systems** to address these multifaceted challenges.

Images in this 2REST Policy Brief were taken by street youth for the [Growing up on the Streets](#) Story maps in [Accra](#), [Bukavu](#) and [Harare](#).



Recommendations

2REST recommends **institutional approaches** that **build relationships across multisystemic domains**, working together to **redress the absence of state involvement** in meeting the basic needs of street youth. At the same time, **supporting, maintaining, and sustaining the existing personal and social resilience resources** highlighted in this policy brief is vital.

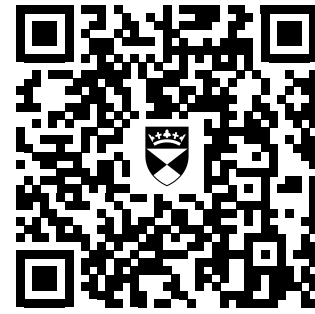
- **Assessing unmet needs:** Auditing how local state services meet, or fail, the needs of street youth would **establish a baseline of what basic needs are unmet**, and how resource access can be widened.
- All **solutions must be collaborative**, respecting street youth agency and to be involved in decisions about their lives.

Financial resources are crucial to **enable street youth to meet their basic needs** including food, shelter, and WASH facilities.

- **Enabling young people to earn money in the informal sector**, e.g. car washing, load carrying, with local authorities acting to maintain fair treatment, will help street youth out of the 'hunger trap'.
- Recognising that **poverty drives young people to street settings** to resiliently seek to support themselves and their families; **a multisystemic approach** helps them to also make productive **contributions to their community**.
- Some income allows street youth have to purchase food, shelter and WASH; in the absence of livelihoods, communities and the state should provide safety nets.
- Food, shelter and WASH are **fundamental human needs and rights**; the state can fulfil their obligations (see boxes on rights) by working with street youth, communities and NGOs, to ensure that basic needs are met. Access to social protection and other welfare programmes, currently open only to households (or parents) with an address, could be widened to include street youth, using e.g. NGO addresses.
- Creating or **broadening access to safe spaces**, adjacent to young people's places of work, including forms of storage, shelter, WASH facilities, and healthy food.

2REST recommendations highlight the necessity of coordinated comprehensive approaches across systems to effectively address the complex challenges faced by street youth, respecting their agency and right to be involved in decisions about their lives, and fostering their long-term wellbeing and survival.

2REST Recommendations inter-link across our Policy Briefs: *Basic Needs, Health, Livelihoods, Violence, and International Policy.*



For 2REST and Growing up on the Streets information and resources please visit: <https://uod.ac.uk/growing-streets>

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2REST has an international advisory board comprised of 26 practitioner, policy and academic members, in collaboration with and chaired by the Consortium for Street Children.

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Participant names have been changed to protect the identity of street youth across the three cities.

