



Resilient Violence Reduction Systems for Street Youth

2REST

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

Key points

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- This brief highlights **Risks and Resources** around violence in street contexts, from **data collected with street youth** in three African cities.
- **Street youth regularly endure multiple forms of violence**, ranging from **verbal abuse** and **harassment** to extreme forms of **physical violence**, including **police brutality**, violent relationships, and **sexual violence**.
- A **combination** of factors support street youth resilience:
 - **Personal resilience resources:** age, agency, problem-solving abilities.
 - **Relational resources:** social networks comprising of peers, partners, and their communities; occasionally NGOs and authorities.
- Assessment of combined multisystemic resilience factors identifies **support from the state and civil society to be absent or inadequate**.
- **2REST recommends a comprehensive combination of multisystemic resources** that fulfils state obligations and works with street youth to help tackle violence.

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).



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.

The data reveals that street youth face an array of violence related challenges. It also points to resources that enable street youth to navigate violence in their street environments. We conclude by making recommendations that would circumvent future risks and support the existing resources that street youth rely on.

- For more information see [*Growing up on the Streets*](#) briefing paper on [Safe Movement](#).
- Check out story maps made with street youth: with sections on the challenges of Keeping safe during the pandemic and beyond in [Harare](#); Independence and Safety in [Bukavu](#), and Keeping Safe in the City in [Accra](#).

Estelle in Bukavu gave examples of personal and formal resources

The importance of friends' support: "We must all intervene to give her a hand. If Cimbanga is attacked at her place and she calls me, I will call for Gabrielle, Kitambila and all of us will meet there. We must fight and she will be freed. We fight for one another."

Police support in Bukavu when Estelle was attacked by members of the community:

"When Yema saw that I was beaten, she rushed to call the police to remove me from their hands. The population first attacked the police, the police shot guns in the air and the population fled."



The right to protection from violence for street youth

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The rights of street youth to live free from violence and discrimination is enshrined in international and regional law.

The Banjul Charter (OAU, 1981) and the **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child** (OAU, 1990, Articles 16, 21, 29) are binding on 50 African States. **The Maputo Protocol** (AU, 2003), addressing the rights of African women, is less widely adopted but has been ratified by Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda. In 2025, the AU adopted the **Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls**, targeting the eradication of violence against them.

The African Union's development plan **Agenda 2063** (AUC, 2015) envisions a violence-free society. Together these instruments obligate African States to safeguard individuals, protect them from violence, ensure access to justice, and provide supportive services when people have experienced violence, whether the source of the violence is state employees, vigilantes claiming to act in the public interest, family members, romantic partners, peers or anyone else.

UN General Comment 21 addresses specific obligations for states around street youth (UNGC21), taking a firm stance against all forms of violence and harassment, calling for laws to prohibit violence towards street children (para 57). It emphasizes the importance of accountability, advocating states to hold perpetrators to account, whether private citizens or state actors, ensuring they face consequences for their actions (para 57). UNGC21 calls for measures to protect street children from sexual exploitation (para 58) and harassment or violence (para 60) for proactive prevention through risk assessments, training, and raising awareness to reduce incidents of violence.

References:

- OAU (Organization of African Unity). (1981). African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ("Banjul Charter").
- UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (2000). CESCR General Comment No. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health.
- UNOHCHR. (1966). International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- Ungar, M., & Theron, L. (2020). Resilience and mental health: how multisystemic processes contribute to positive outcomes. *The Lancet. Psychiatry* 7(5): 441–448.
- UNCRC (2013). (UNGC14) General comment No. 14 on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration.
- UNOHCHR. (2017). (UNGC21) General comment No. 21 on children in street situations.
- UNOHCHR. (2003). CRC General Comment No. 4: Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Examples of personal and relational resources from Harare and Accra

Goodwill in Harare explained the benefits of physical strength: "The other day some police officers came to our base and tried to beat up people, but we resisted them. Since that day, those police officers did not return to our base".

Papa in Accra said it was important to be known in an area to move safely: "People go to a certain place when they have a friend there, or they know someone there. We hustlers like forming groups, so if you are not part of a particular group, it will be difficult for you. When you should go to any of these places without knowing anyone there, they might mistreat you."



Violence Risks

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Lowlights around violence

The wide range of violence related risks that street youth experience are caused by street peers, members of the public, public service employees, state agents, including police and soldiers, and private security personnel.

- **Sexual violence by state agents and the community:** Sexual violence is prevalent towards street youth. Street girls and young women are sexually assaulted by men in the community and older street youth in all three cities. Street boys also experience **sexual violence**, or like street girls, engage in same-sex acts either against their will or in exchange for food due to hunger. **Police and soldiers** sexually assault street youth, particularly girls, in Bukavu and Harare. Street girls are regularly coerced to exchange sex to avoid arrest or detention in Bukavu. They also report being gang raped by police officers and soldiers.
- **Gender based violence** is widespread in street contexts. It is commonplace for street girls and young women to be **beaten by their partners** and street peers in all cities. In Accra, Papa explained that “some of the boys” don’t respect their girlfriends because “they only met on the street”; this **lack of respect** was expressed in violence: “he will beat you just anyhow he likes.” Constance advised a friend to leave her boyfriend, whom she was financially supporting: “you are taking care of the boy who always beats and maltreats you; I will not stay with a guy like that”. Papa believed he needed to “discipline” girlfriends who “misbehave”, otherwise “she will not respect me”. These attitudes by street youth reflect **wider deep-seated cultural norms around gender**.
- **Age:** Older street boys experienced violence due to **lack of trust** and **discrimination** in their street communities, whilst younger street boys are **bullied** by older street youth who take their money, blankets and food.
- **Physical environment risks:** Factors such as **time of day**, mode of **transportation**, neighbourhood **spaces street youth** walk around, and the nature of their **activities** amplify their exposure to violence. **Newcomers** in Bukavu are sometimes sexually abused by older street peers. In Harare, walking around the Mukuvisi River exposes street youth to sexual violence and harassment.
- **Discriminatory protection services:** Police do not provide reliable protection services. In Harare, street youth recount how they are **dismissed by police** when they report incidents of harassment and other forms of violence. They are often **beaten by state agents (police, soldiers) at night**. When imprisoned, street youth still face discrimination.



Violence Resources

Adopted by street youth across systems

Relational resources

- **Supportive peers:** The relationships that street youth have with their peers enhance feelings of safety. They **walk and play in groups to protect themselves** from violence. Bukavu street youth recount how they had to intervene to help their friend, Cimbangala, when she was attacked by outsiders.
- **Supportive partners:** Street girls and young women depend on the support of their **partners** for protection. This includes physical protection or protection by association. For instance, Feza, in Bukavu, was spared from sexual abuse because her boyfriend Gaston was a feared criminal.
- **Community acceptance:** Being a familiar face in the **community** sometimes protects street youth from discrimination and harassment. Goodwill in Harare shares how his group are not harassed around the market because people know them.

Personal resources

- **Pregnancy status:** Motherhood and pregnancy reduce vulnerability to physical violence in Bukavu. For instance, Estelle's peers and members of the public stopped harassing her when she became pregnant. **Pregnancy earned her respect in the community.** Likewise, Posho was spared from gang rape because she had become a mother.
- **Physical strength and maturity:** Physical strength gives street boys and young men the ability to fight back and protect themselves from violent attacks. Goodwill from Harare recounts an incident where his group used their strength and agility to fight back against police raids. They **resisted police officers** who came to their sleeping area to beat them up.
- **Problem solving abilities:** street youth use a combination of unconventional strategies to navigate violence risks. street youth **stay dirty** instead of going to bath in the river to protect themselves from sexual violence and harassment in Harare. They also **befriend police officers** or have sexual relationships with them for protection. Goodwill recounted how, as a result of befriending a police officer who used to harass them, he treated them better. Street girls and young women in Bukavu engage in **transactional sexual relationships** with the police to protect themselves from police inflicted violence and arrest.



- **Formal social resources:** Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) advocate for street youth's safety needs by highlighting issues of violence to government authorities and other institutions.
- **Institutional resources:** Police patrols in high-risk areas occasionally provide protection from violent attacks against street youth and children. Police visibility in Harare sometimes protects street youth from rape and harassment.
- **Transport:** Access to **cheap transportation** such as motorbike taxis and small buses (known as combi in DRC and Zimbabwe, trotro in Ghana) allow street girls to avoid night-time dangers while travelling around.
- **Access to free and safe natural spaces:** street youth shared that Bukavu's lake, river and reed-filled green spaces serve as their **hiding spots** and safe sleeping areas shielding young people from risks of violence.

Conclusion

This policy brief has shown how street youth predominantly rely on **individual** and **relational resources** to navigate violence risks. Institutional support is sporadic and often negative from state systems such as the police, demonstrating the critical need for **positive action**. Social services and child protection services are rarely mentioned. The data also reveals **limited physical environment resources** such as adequate shelter, food, and safe spaces (see 2REST's [Basic Needs Policy Brief](#) for more detail), exposing street youth to **violence**. There is a need to strengthen responses by **bridging the gap** between support services, civil society and NGOs, family or parental care. Putting the onus only on **street youth to be resilient by themselves is ineffective**. The daily experiences of violence in the streets show that young people need systematic solutions, hence the call for **multisystemic resilience** responses for street contexts.

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](#).

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



Recommendations

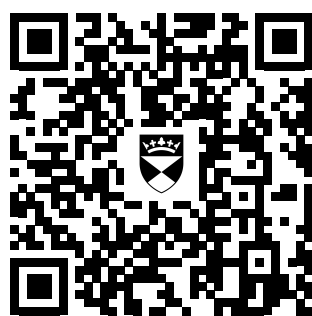
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2REST recommends **institutional approaches that build relationships across multisystemic domains**, working together to **redress the absence of state involvement** in meeting the needs of street youth as they develop sustainable livelihoods. At the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

- Adopt and enforce **zero tolerance** policies toward those who commit sexual crimes or other **acts of violence towards street youth** and ensure prompt **action is taken against perpetrators**.
- street youth who report violence must be **treated fairly** and supported to feel physically and emotionally safe in the streets. Processes of reporting must be accessible, and their reports must be taken seriously.
- **State agents such as police and soldiers should be held accountable** for the harassment and violence meted to street youth. Training must be provided that focuses on protecting street youth and preventing violence towards them.
- **Financial challenges** keep street youth vulnerable to violence. Opportunities for street youth to make a living without putting themselves in positions that expose them to violence should be trialled (see recommendations in **2REST's *Livelihoods Policy Brief***).
- The prevalence of **gender-based violence** reflects wider cultural norms. Relevant government bodies and NGOs should work with street youth to challenge harmful relationship practices.

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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