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**Unscalable barriers? Factors associated with initiation and continuation
of street-life among street children in Colombo City**

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The objective of this qualitative and descriptive cross-sectional study was to describe factors associated with initiation of street children in Colombo City to street life and to describe factors associated with the continuation of their present lifestyle. Twenty semi-structured interviews with key informants and 10 focus group discussions and 25 semi-structured interviews with street children were conducted to collect data, which were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Participants were from Fort, Pettah, Slave Island and Maradana areas of Colombo City. All major ethnic and religious groups were represented in this sample of street children. Children who participated were aged 8 -18 years and most were boys. Initiation of street life for most of children was due to the influence of the family and aided by a close family member (one or both parents, siblings or a close family relative) or peers. The commonest factors reported as reasons for initiation of street life were death/illness/imprisonment of one or both parent/s, extreme poverty, alcohol/substance abuse by fathers, and being born in the street. The majority lived with their mothers, while some lived with their fathers, siblings, and uncles / aunts / grandparents. Many other children lived on their own, without an adult guardian. The level of education of these children is very low and none has employable technical skills.

For many children, street life has become the norm in their lives, in which they feel comfortable and do not want to get away from. Although many others prefer to escape from street life to an attractive alternative, given their educational and social background, they may be unable to obtain alternative employment/income sources. Poverty, low educational level, lack of employable skills, and lack of identification documents are factors barring them from pursuing an alternative, socially acceptable lifestyle. Reducing the vulnerability of children due to key factors associated with the initiation of street life will reduce the incidences of children coming to the streets. Policy and attitudinal changes may be required to address the factors that bar the street children from pursuing alternative (and more socially acceptable) lifestyles.

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