

‘On My Own’: the Exploitation of Street-involved Children on the Rapidly Changing Thai-Cambodian Border

Jarrett Davis

Glenn Miles, PhD*

up! International

Abstract

The effects of regional and national conflicts often have pronounced impacts on the psychosocial and socioeconomic development of children, not only for those who directly experience conflict, but also for subsequent generations. The city of Poipet, which runs along the Thai-Cambodian border, has been in a unique position to observe these effects. From the refugee camps on the Thai side of the border in the 1980s, through the writing of Cambodia’s constitution in the 1990s, to the long period of recovery in which the areas have become synonymous with unsafe migration, trafficking, and various forms of exploitation.

The data shows that children who crossed the border for work demonstrated a heightened risk to physical and sexual violence. Gender was also found to be a considerable risk factor for street-involved children, with boys twice as likely as girls to disclose experiences of physical violence, and four times as likely to disclose experiences of sexual violence. Despite this, neither males nor females perceived sexual violence as a danger for males.

This research draws on primary data collected from 80 street-involved Cambodian children living and/or working along the Thai-Cambodian border area of Poipet and Aranyaprathet and offers an initial analysis of their key experiences, perspectives, and vulnerabilities.

I. Introduction

While no children or young people in modern-day Cambodia lived through the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge (1972-1979),

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E-mail: jarrett@jarrettdavis.org (corresponding author). Funding for this research was provided by CEDAR Fund, an independent Christian relief and development organisation in Hong Kong; and Ping-Pong-a-Thon (PPAT), a 24-hour table tennis event that runs in venues across Australia supporting anti-trafficking and exploitation initiatives throughout Southeast Asia.

many still suffer from its long-term impacts.¹ The impacts of violence and conflict are diverse and have particular and pronounced effects on a child's psychosocial and socioeconomic development. Psychosocially, impacts can include maladaptive parenting styles,² excessive domestic violence, and lacking educational systems. Socioeconomically, the disrupted educational systems often lead to higher fertility rates and increased poverty.³ The Thai-Cambodian border has perhaps seen these impacts the most. The Thai side of the border housed many of the refugee camps during the Vietnamese occupation. In 1992-3, the Cambodian side became the settlement of many returning, and often temporarily housed, refugees including areas littered with landmines. Instabilities have remained, with fighting over land issues between Thais and Cambodians breaking out in February and April 2011, causing many casualties, destroying houses, and sending tens of thousands of people living near the combat zones into evacuation centres.⁴

In recent years, however, as industrialisation and trade has increased throughout Southeast Asia, Cambodia has seen 300% growth in travel and tourism to the country since 2010 and a rapid increase in foreign investment from 2009-2019.⁵ The country has welcomed this large-scale development through the creation and growth of its Special Economic and free-trade zones (SEZ), where casinos, bars, hotels, and other entertainment venues proliferate. The city of Poipet is home to an exceptionally large SEZ, in which the Cambodian and Thai governments allow for special business and trade laws to stimulate economic development. Such zones have been criticised for negative impacts including labour exploitation and poor working conditions⁶ as well as contributing to the outgrowth of child sexual exploitation.⁷ In Poipet, the SEZ sits along the primary land-entry border between Thailand and Cambodia and serves as

¹ G Miles and NP Thomas, "'Don't Grind an Egg Against a Stone' – Children's Rights and Violence in Cambodian History and Culture' (2007) 16 Child Abuse Review 383-400.

² Y Danieli, 'Assessing Trauma Across Cultures from a Multigenerational Perspective' in JP Wilson and CS Tang (eds), *Cross-Cultural Assessment of Psychological Trauma and PTSD*, International and Cultural Psychology Series (2007) <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-0-387-70990-1_4> accessed 1 November 2021.

³ A Islam, C Ouch, R Smyth and L Choon Wang, 'The Long-term Effects of Civil Conflicts on Education, Earnings, and Fertility: Evidence from Cambodia' (2016) 44(3) *Journal of Comparative Economics* 800-820.

⁴ K Ngoun, 'Thai Cambodian Conflict Rooted in History - East Asia Forum. Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific' *East Asia Forum* (2012) <<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/01/27/thai-cambodian-conflict-rooted-in-history/>> accessed 1 November 2021.

⁵ Cambodian Ministry of Tourism, 'Tourism Statistics Report, Ministry of Tourism, Statistics, and Tourism Information 2019' *Cambodian Ministry of Tourism* (2019).

⁶ The World Bank, 'Special Economic Zones: Performance, Lessons Learned, and Implications for Zone Development' *The World Bank* (2013).

⁷ ECPAT International, 'Regional Report on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism - Southeast Asia' (2016) <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Regional-Overview_Southeast-Asia.pdf> accessed 1 November 2021.

a transit point for international travellers and as a key point of trade between the countries. These conditions draw economic migrants looking for income from formal and informal economies that have developed around the border. While the growth of business investment in the area has reportedly increased the number of jobs available for some families, opportunities for unskilled laborers are scarce and often leave migrants in unstable economic conditions.⁸ In this environment, many street-involved families and economic migrants are no longer able to afford to live in Poipet due to rapid increases in living costs, and face frequent and unexpected evictions by landowners offered large sums of money by wealthy investors, thus aggravating the vulnerability factors for exploitation.⁹

Together, the authors have over 25 years of experience working in Cambodia on both sides of the Thai-Cambodian border, including in modern-day Poipet and working within the 'site two' refugee camp following the Khmer Rouge. Today, the stark contrast between Thailand and Cambodia is immediately noticeable upon crossing the border. After passing the flashy lights of the casinos and newly built hotels and entertainment venues, the areas surrounding the SEZ are extremely poor. The presence of children working on the streets is ubiquitous. 'Umbrella' children are known to provide shelter to tourists as they guide them to their hotels, but they are also known to be extremely vulnerable to travelling child sex offenders. Young boys are often seen pushing excessively heavy carts across the border to and from the Thai markets, an area where the smuggling of migrants across this border is also commonplace.¹⁰

Despite its common usage, the term 'street-children'¹¹ is often seen as controversial as it is often used in ways that are victimising or stigmatising. The term also may overlook other vulnerable groups of children on the street, such as those who may have homes to go to, but choose to stay on the street because home is an unstable environment or feels unsafe.¹² Recognising these nuances, this paper uses the term 'street-involved children' to better encompass these diverse experiences.

⁸ J Fiss, *Street Children's Survey Report in Poipet, Cambodia* (Cambodia, Damnok Toek, 2013).

⁹ I Sampson, G Miles and E Piano, 'Undocumented, Unregistered, and Invisible: an Exploratory Study of the Reasons for and Effects of Migrating to Thailand of Cambodian Young People' (2021) 41(7/8) *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 862-874.

¹⁰ S Marilyn and W Ocha, 'The Smuggling of Cambodian Migrant Workers to Thailand: The Case Studies of Poipet City and Sa Kaeo Province' *Rangsit University International Research Conference 2019 - Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies* (2019) <<https://rsu-con.rsu.ac.th/proceedings>> accessed 1 November 2021.

¹¹ S Thomas de Benítez 'State of the World's Street Children: Violence' *Consortium for Street Children* (2007) <<https://www.streetchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/state-of-the-world-violence.pdf>> accessed 1 November 2021.

¹² C Panter-Brick, 'Street Children, Human Rights, and Public Health: A Critique and Future Directions' (2002) 31 *Annual Review of Anthropology* 147-171.

Drug use and harmful alcohol consumption significantly increases the risks faced by children on the street due to a greater likelihood of participation in risk-taking behaviours.¹³ These risks are further increased due to a lack of access to information on safer sex and harm reduction which can lead to an increased threat of HIV/AIDS transmission.¹⁴ In a systematic literature review of 108 articles on street-involved children in low and middle-income nations, substance use was the most common issue discussed with usage prevalence rates ranging from 35 to 100%.¹⁵ Common factors associated with substance use among street-involved children were being male, being older in age, lacking family contact, depression, and previous experiences of abuse.¹⁶

Research suggests a link between drug use and sexual abuse. The impact of childhood sexual abuse can include post-traumatic stress disorder, increased anxiety, depression, sexual promiscuity, or increased rates of suicide.¹⁷ In this context, survivors may resort to drug use as a coping mechanism, or 'emotional avoidance' that numbs the pain of traumatic experiences.¹⁸ This also sheds light on the disproportionately high number of street-living youth who are also resorting to drug use when compared to non-street-living youth. The harsh realities of living on the street, frequent and repetitive exposure to stress, pressure to tolerate hard jobs, including sexual and labour exploitation, a deficit of emotional support and sense of belonging combined with street-life subculture and drug induced collective rituals of street gangs all contribute to excessive drug use.

This connection was found in research with street-involved children in Chiang Mai, where living on the street, exposure to stress, and lack of emotional support were found to be contributing factors to the high rate of drug use among children living on the street.¹⁹ For street-involved children, the exchange of sex

¹³ National Institute on Drug Abuse, 'Preventing Drug-Use Among Children and Adolescents: A Research-Based Guide for Parents, Educators, and Community Leaders' *National Institute on Drug Abuse* (United States, 2003) <https://www.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/preventingdruguse_2.pdf> accessed 1 November 2021.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ J Woan, J Lin and C Auerswald, 'The Health Status of Street Children and Youth in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Literature' (2013) 53(3) *Journal of Adolescent Health* 314-321.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ E Paolucci, ML Genuis and C Violato, 'A Meta-Analysis of the Published Research on the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse' (2001) 135(1) *Journal of Psychology* 17-20.

¹⁸ K Lalor and R McElvaney, 'Child Sexual Abuse, Links to Later Sexual Exploitation/High-Risk Sexual Behavior, and Prevention/Treatment' (2010) 11(4) *Dublin Institute of Technology* 159-177.

¹⁹ J Davis, J Fiss and G Miles, 'To Help My Parents: An Exploratory Study on the Hidden Vulnerabilities of Street-Involved Children and Youth in Chiang Mai, Thailand' (up! International, 2016) <<https://up-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ToHelpMyParents-English.pdf>> accessed 1 November 2021.

for benefits can become a necessary means for survival.²⁰ While Cambodia and Thailand are understood as key destinations for sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism, local offenders are often overlooked by national and international efforts against child sexual exploitation.²¹ A baseline study on street-involved children in Sihanoukville, Cambodia found 18% of boys and 14% of girls who described trading sex or sexual abuse for various forms of remuneration.²² In Phnom Penh, one in four street-involved children described instances in which adults had touched them sexually in the genital area, which was nearly twice as common among boys,²³ with similar findings among street-involved children in other Southeast Asian cities.²⁴

Recent prevalence studies on childhood experiences of violence in Cambodia and the Philippines²⁵ (including sexual, emotional, and physical forms of violence) have shown boys to be more vulnerable to sexual violence in comparison with girls.²⁶ Despite this, boys are often assumed to be more able to protect themselves and to recover more easily from trauma than girls and the existence of male sexual abuse is often ignored or denied, leading to an underreporting of cases.²⁷ Research on sexual violence against males in transitional contexts finds that even when male victims disclose, the sexual nature of their violence is often diminished with sexual violence commonly miscoded as physical vio-

²⁰ B Marshall and E Wood, 'Sex Work and Sex Exchange Among Street Children: An Urgent Need for a Global Response' (2009) 44(3) *Journal of Adolescent Health* 201-202.

²¹ ECPAT International, 'Regional Report on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism - Southeast Asia' (2016) <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Regional-Overview_Southeast-Asia.pdf> accessed 1 November 2021.

²² J Davis, G Miles, M Eno and A Rowland, "'Boys Are Like Gold': The Gendered Differences in Sexual Violence Against Street-Involved Children in Southwest Cambodia' (2021) 6(1) *Journal of Modern Slavery* 1-35.

²³ JD Davis, GM Miles, S Blackburn and E Mosebach-Kornelsen, "'There is Always Violence': An Exploratory Study of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Street-Involved Children' (2021) 6(1) *Article 6 Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* <<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol6/iss1/6>> accessed 1 November 2021.

²⁴ See, for example, JD Davis and GM Miles, 'They Didn't Help Me; They Shamed Me: A Baseline Study on the Vulnerabilities of Street-Involved Boys to Sexual Exploitation in Manila, Philippines, Love146' (2015) <<http://www.streetchildrenresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/A-Baseline-Study-on-the-Vulnerabilities-of-Street-Involved-Boys.pdf>> accessed 1 November 2021.

²⁵ United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 'National Baseline Study on Violence against Children in the Philippines' *UNICEF* (2016) <[https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/491/file/National%20Baseline%20Study%20on%20Violence%20Against%20Children%20in%20the%20Philippines%20Results%20\(executive%20summary\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/491/file/National%20Baseline%20Study%20on%20Violence%20Against%20Children%20in%20the%20Philippines%20Results%20(executive%20summary).pdf)> accessed 1 November 2021.

²⁶ United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 'Findings from Cambodia's Violence Against Children Survey 2013' *UNICEF* (2013) <www.unicef.org/cambodia/UNICEF_VAC_Full_Report_English.pdf> accessed 1 November 2021.

²⁷ J Frederick, 'Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys in South Asia: A Review of Research Findings, Legislation, Policy and Programme Responses' *UNICEF, Innocenti* (2010) <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2010_02.pdf> accessed 1 November 2021.

lence²⁸ adding to their invisibility. Further, boys and young men have been found to suffer reduced health outcomes, lack of awareness, and unavailable victim support services due to aftercare programming being commonly embedded within maternal health programs or gender-based violence services, which can prevent males from seeking services.²⁹

The aim of this research is to understand the vulnerabilities of street involved children to sex trafficking and other forms of violence and trafficking on the Thai-Cambodian border with a particular concern for gendered differences, to better inform practitioners about the needs of street children and to contribute to the prevention of abuse and exploitation. The title *On My Own* refers to the way these street children are often left on their own to fend for themselves as their parents seek work in Thailand.

2. Methods

This study employs both purposive and chain-referral sampling methodologies to conduct 80³⁰ semi-structured interviews with Cambodian street-involved children (67.5% male and 32.5% female) along the Thai-Cambodian border in Poipet, Cambodia. The interviews were conducted by five social workers from Damnok Toek,³¹ a local Cambodian organisation, and the ChildSafe Network,³² an international NGO that has worked with vulnerable children and families in Poipet since 2003.³³

Data was collected in 2016. Prior to collecting data, training in the research and its methodology was provided for the social workers. Social workers were provided additional training in trauma-informed social research practice and ethics by a licenced (United States) clinical psychologist, specialising in children and trauma. Fieldwork was then conducted with the trained social workers to gain a fuller understanding of the context and experiences of local street-based populations and the work already being done with these groups. The mapping activities included focus groups with street-involved children and a mapping

²⁸ International Center for Transitional Justice, 'When No One Calls It Rape: Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys' (ICTJ, 2016) <<https://www.ictj.org/publication/sexual-violence-men-boys>> accessed 1 November 2021.

²⁹ SK Chynoweth, J Freccero and H Touquet, 'Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Conflict and Forced Displacement: Implications for the Health Sector' (2017) 25(51) *Reproductive Health Matters* 90-94.

³⁰ The research involved 80 respondents, but some respondents declined to answer some questions, thus the n-value in some variables is less than 80.

³¹ <<http://damnoktoek.org/>> accessed 1 November 2021.

³² <<http://thinkchilsafe.org>> accessed 1 November 2021.

³³ Long Kleur Market (Thailand), Khbal Spean, Poipet Village, Phsar Akeak (Paliliay 1), and Phsar Kandal Village.

of the various areas in which they engaged in street work. These activities, in addition to a similar mapping with practitioners, allowed the researchers to better contextualise the research instrument and provided meaningful context for the survey findings and their and subsequent analysis.

For inclusion in the study respondents needed to be:

1. Street-working or street-living;
2. Aged between 8 and 18 years old;
3. Not living in a residential structure (NGO or government) nor benefiting from close case management from any social service provider;
4. Freely consenting to participate;
5. Not known to be *heavily* under the influence of substances so that they could adequately respond to questions;
6. Having no identified risk of harm by participation in the interview.

The participants were given the option to join the research as part of the implementing partner's normal outreach activities in the target communities. All interviews were conducted with the child protection policies of both the partner and up! International. Due to the context, parental consent was not always possible as many children were separated from their parents and often had no direct adult carer. All social workers who were involved agreed to the child protection policies of their NGO and had agreed to research ethical guidelines (as below) which ensured children gave assent and only responded to questions they felt comfortable answering.

2.1. Research Instrument

The questionnaire used for this study was a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions covering a variety of topics including the life context and experiences of street-involved children with a particular focus on migration to Thailand, substance use, and experiences of violence. The instrument was reviewed exhaustively with the team of local social workers to ensure clarity of language, order of questions, and levels of comfort among the interviewers, whilst specifically taking in account cultural and linguistic subtleties unknown to the research coordinators who were not Cambodian.

Prior to conducting the initial interviews, a focus group was carried out to better understand the context and to learn from street-involved children, mapping some of the critical areas where children work within the border area and the various opportunities and threats that each of these areas present. Additionally, the research mapping process aided in the contextualisation of the survey to the unique cross-border context of Poipet (Cambodia) and Aranyaprathet (Thailand) and its special economic and free-trade zone.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

At the time the research was conducted, the only National Ethics Committee was under the Royal Government of Cambodia Ministry of Health and focused on quantitative research (mainly drug trials). A University ethics committee was not used because none of the researchers were working for a university at the time of the study. All interviewers were practising local social workers from Damnoek Toek and underwent ethical and research-focused child protection training with a licensed child trauma psychologist based on UNIAP Ethical Guidelines for Human Trafficking Research (2008). During this training, role-playing and field-testing exercises were utilised to familiarise interviewers with the research instrument and to aid them in empathising with the feelings of the child being interviewed. During the training, response protocols were established for children who disclosed exploitative and/or violent situations, so that appropriate responses or referrals could be offered, once the interview had concluded. All field activities followed the implementing partner's existing and rigorous child protection standards and all non-NGO staff members were required to dually review and sign child-protection policy agreements with both the implementing partners and up! International.

During data collection, each interview was conducted as a semi-private dialogue between the respondent and social worker, to which each respondent gave verbal and written consent. Interviews were conducted in prearranged, safe locations, which were identified through fieldwork prior to data gathering. Respondents were informed of the study purpose and the nature of the questions and assured confidentiality, that their names would never be recorded on the research form, and that they would be able to stop the interview at any time or skip any question. During the interview, if the child disclosed any immediate danger or risk, social workers provided referral to social, legal, and a variety of health services after the interview had concluded. Social workers ensured that children understood that participation was completely voluntary, and that non-participation would in no way affect the social worker's relationship with the child. Social workers were always identified by branded shirts from the implementing partner, which are commonly used to identify child-protection workers and are well-recognised throughout the communities included within the research sample.

The initial focus for this baseline study was decided as an agreement between the leadership of Damnoek Toek (DT) and up! International, the NGO responsible for managing the research process.³⁴

³⁴ <<http://up-international.org/>> accessed 1 November 2021.

2.3. Limitations

This research can only provide specific information about the children in this geographic area and may not represent other areas along the Thai Cambodian border. The border area is a rapidly changing context so new vulnerability factors may be introduced, and others replaced that will impact the lives of street involved children. The children interviewed were those within areas that the NGO already worked and were familiar with. While the findings do not establish prevalence (and the research does not attempt to do so), the respondents included in the sample were reflective of the various demographics known to exist in the border area, based upon the collective experiences of the implementing partner. In addition to the quantitative variables, which establish the nature and extent of the issue, open-ended, or qualitative responses, aim to establish reasons, motive, and other dynamics which may not be clearly reflected within quantitative findings.

3. Findings

The ages of participants range from 8 to 18 years, with an average age of 13. Similar ages were reported between boys and girls. None of the children attended school at the time. Three in four (75%) said they had not attended school in the current school year and one in four had never attended school. The majority (63%) had migrated to Poipet from a diverse range of Cambodian provinces including, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Prey Veng, Pursat, Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, and Kampong Cham, among other locales. Four children were born outside of Cambodia, including three in Thailand and one in Vietnam. On average, children had lived in Poipet for seven years. The majority had migrated for economic reasons, many of which seem to be overlapping. Nearly half (48%) say that they or their family came to Poipet for begging and nearly a third came searching for employment (29%). Three children say that their migration was due to the debts of their families. Most (81%) migrated with their immediate families and 13% migrated with their extended families. To a lesser extent, three migrated without parents or carers (6%), two alone and one with friends.

3.1. Caretakers and Homelife

Most participants (73%) lived with at least one biological parent and more than a third (35%) had at least one parent who had died. While all girls reported seeing their primary caretaker every day, a quarter of boys (25%) do not, with three seeing their caretaker 'every couple of days', three 'once a week', and four 'every couple of weeks'. Boys were also more likely to go for long periods of time without seeing their parents or carers.

The majority (80%) describe being yelled or cursed at in the home. Of these, most (64%) described being yelled at due to work, including not working enough, not earning enough, 'being lazy', or not doing chores. To a lesser extent, a fifth (20%) described verbal violence for not coming back home. Lastly, three children described verbal violence due to disobedience, and one described verbal violence due to their caretaker's alcoholism.

A quarter of children (25%) reported that they had no one to go to when they were 'feeling angry or sad'. Among the three-in-four children who describe having someone to go to for emotional support, the majority (61%) say that this person is related to them, and more than a third (39%) say that this is a member of their peer group. One illustrates, 'I have a blind mother at home who can't take care of me'. (R76)

A third of children (33%) sleep on the streets at least sometimes.³⁵ This is nearly twice as common among boys, with 42% (21 boys) sleeping on the streets at least sometimes, in comparison to 20% of girls (five). A sixth of children (16%) primarily sleep on the street and do not have a house to sleep in at night. Among the 63 children who have a house to sleep in at night, 13 (20%) sleep on the streets at least a few nights a week, with some sleeping on the street as many as four to six nights a week. Two say that they sometimes sleep at the implementing partner's drop-in centre during the daytime.

Children indicate sleeping on the streets for a variety of reasons, including having to work late hours, avoiding violence at home, and drug use. Some children indicate that they actively avoid going home, and others note that they do not sleep at night, but rather sleep during the day in one of the implementing partner's drop-in shelters. One boy notes, 'I don't dare go home' (R44) and another is prevented from returning, 'my stepfather beats me and does not allow me to enter my home' (R2) Another simply states, 'I don't want to go home.' (R29)

More than two thirds (68%) of the 63 children who had a house to sleep in lived with family members, the remaining 20 children lived in a variety of other arrangements with non-family members, including friends and workmates and some lived independently.

The majority, or 60% of respondents (43 children), described that their parents migrate to Thailand for work. In all but three cases, the parents leave the children behind in Cambodia. Children described their parents to be gone for varying lengths of time. For nearly a third (30% or 11 children), their parents were only gone during the day and returned in the evenings. Yet, for another significant group of respondents, 14 children (38%), their parents seem to be gone indefinitely with respondents indicating that they had left a long time ago and did not give an indication as to when they may return. For the remainder,

³⁵ n=75 as five boys did not provide details about where they usually sleep.

six children (16%) indicated that their parents visit from Thailand on a yearly basis, four (11%) indicated their parents were gone for 1-6 months at a time, while two (5%) indicated that their parents were just gone for a few days at a time. Most children of migrating parents were left alone or with limited supervision. Considering the children of parents who have migrated, nearly a quarter (24%) were left alone and a sixth (18%) were left with a sibling while their parents were out of the country for work, which may leave them unsupervised and with increased vulnerabilities as they work on the streets.

'I want my mother to stop selling eggs in Thailand and sell them in Cambodia instead.' (R65)

3.2. Working on the Border in Cambodia and Thailand

Most children (71%) regularly crossed the border into Thailand for work; however, most seemed to stay within the vicinity of the border and did not proceed further into Thailand. Children often crossed the border during the day, sometimes staying overnight (when the formal border closes), engaging in various forms of income generation on the street. Within this group, girls seem more likely to migrate to do specific work, with 80% describing a variety of tasks or jobs that they did across the border to earn money. Boys tended to be more vague in their responses, nearly half (48%) simply said that they crossed 'in search of money'.

'I want to go to Thailand with my older sibling to get work.' (R32)

'I want to study Thai and work in construction to earn money to feed grandma.' (R63)

'I am saving money without mom knowing, so I can get a border pass.' (R66)

Most children (55%) cross into Thailand informally, usually by walking across the stream that divides the countries, inside cargo carts, or through the unguarded countryside. Twenty (45%) reported that they crossed the border using a formal border pass from Thai Immigration, and one indicated using a fake border pass.

'When the three of us, siblings, were begging in Thailand, Thai police arrested us and put us in the [immigration] centre.' (R40)

Children commonly describe crossing the border during the day, sometimes staying overnight to engage in various forms of street-work in the Thai markets along the border in Aranyaprathet.³⁶ Vulnerability to physical and sexual violence were especially notable among these groups with children who cross into Thailand two times more likely to report physical violence and 4.1 times more likely to report being hurt or threatened by a weapon in comparison with those

³⁶ A border city in Thailand adjacent to the Cambodian city of Poipet.

who solely work on the Cambodian side of the border (see Table 1). Twenty-five children (45%) described being arrested in Thailand – more than half of whom described detainment at the border. Four children – all males – describe being beaten by police upon their arrest. While females were much less likely to indicate physical violence from police, they were more likely to describe detainment (31% of females; 19% of males). In addition, the 14 (26%) who described physical violence from police noted considerable violence toward boys who engage in street work in Thailand from Thai police and security guards. In both male and female focus groups, children described males who commonly faced violence and threats, including threats with weapons and one instance in which a child notes a brother who was thrown (or dropped) from a roof.

3.3. Substance Use

Nineteen children (27%) reported using intoxicating substances, such as glue or methamphetamines. Substance users were nearly all boys and comprised 40% of all boys in the sample. One substance user was female and cited occasional use of glue. The average age children began using glue was 10.8 years of age, the youngest being six and the oldest being 14 when they first started using. A sixth of all children reported methamphetamines use. All are male and comprise nearly a third of all boys (29%). The average age that boys began using methamphetamines is 12.6 years, the youngest being eight and the oldest being 16 when they first started.

The reasons that boys give for using substances are often connected to the pressures they experience to earn money for their families. Boys describe using glue, methamphetamines, and alcohol at different times to give them stamina to work harder, to deal with stress, and to cope with the effects that the work has on their bodies:

‘I take [methamphetamines] when I get exhausted from pulling the cart.’ (R39)

‘[Methamphetamines] make me feel happy, and not sleepy, so I can keep scavenging.’ (R6)

Boys also demonstrate the effect that their engagement in an adult work environment has on their use of substances:

‘[I drink alcohol] because my fellow Thai workers forced me to drink [while working in Thailand].’ (R32)

‘[I drink alcohol] because on payday the boss buys alcohol.’ (R38)

‘I take glue [and methamphetamines] to follow my friends.’ (R16)

Nearly half of males (49%) reported that they have tried to stop using drugs in the past and 19 (59%) reported that they wanted to stop using drugs. Among those who have tried to stop using drugs, six reported that they have tried to stop using glue, and five noted that they have tried to stop using methamphetamines. Among male users, six believe that staying at home or having a greater connection with their family would help them to stop using drugs.

3.4. Experiences of Violence

Two-thirds of children (66%) noted experiencing various forms of physical violence on the streets (69% of males; 60% of females). Perpetrators of violence include parents, cited by 26% (15% of males; 58% of females); gangs, cited by 24% (31% of males; 5% of females), other adults, cited by 17% (19% of males; 11% of females) and police, cited by 17% (22% of males, no females). Furthermore, 31% of children noted instances in which they had been hurt or threatened with a weapon during their work on the streets (36% of males; 24% of females).

Among children left alone or with a sibling, all but one (92%) indicate experiences of physical violence, largely from older youth, police, and other adults.

Table 1: Physical Violence among Border Crossers

	Border Crossers	Non-Border Crossers	All Children
Overall Physical Violence	43 (84%)	8 (32%)	51 (67%)
by parent or carer	15 (43%)	4 (25%)	19 (37%)
by another adult	10 (29%)	4 (25%)	14 (27%)
by police	13 (37%)	1 (6%)	14 (27%)
by 'gangsters'	18 (51%)	3 (19%)	21 (41%)
by peers	20 (57%)	0 (0%)	20 (39%)
Being hurt or threatened with weapon	15 (31%)	2 (8%)	17 (23%)

Table 2: Sexual Violence among Border Crossers

	Border Crossers	Non-Border Crossers	All Children
Sexual touching by an adult	15 (29%)	3 (12%)	18 (24%)
'More than' sexual touching by an adult	6 (17%)	2 (13%)	8 (16%)

The majority of children (70%) noted being afraid that someone would kill or injure them on the street (74% of males; 63% of females). 'Adults' and/or 'drug users' were the most mentioned offenders with 14 children (29%) mentioning fears of adults and 14 children (29%) mentioning fears of drug users. Following this, seven children (14%) noted fears of gangs (17% of males; 7% of females), among others.

'The gangsters chase and beat me and get money from me.' (R2)

'The Thai police beat me.' (R53) and *'I am afraid of getting beaten by the security guards.'* (R67)

‘Boys get limbs broken for begging.’ (R49)

Sixteen children, or 23%, reported instances in which an adult had touched them inappropriately in the genital area. This was more frequently described by males, with 14 males (31%) citing sexual touching and two females (8%) citing sexual violence. Among the 16 children who describe sexual touching by an adult, 11 reported that this had taken place between one and five times (10 males and one female). Furthermore, one respondent cites that it happens to him ‘all the time’ or ‘regularly’. Seven children, or 11%, describe experiences of sexual violence that have gone beyond just touching, including four children (all male) who reported instances of being physically forced to perform sexual acts.

3.5. Perception of Risk

Notable differences were observed between what children understand as key risks for girls and key risks for boys (see Table 3).³⁷ Girls were commonly seen as vulnerable to rape, followed by risks of being hit by cars. In contrast, boys largely seen as vulnerable to physical violence, including being beaten and hit by cars.

Table 3: What are the key dangers for boys and girls on the street in Poipet?

Dangers for Girls		Dangers for Boys	
Rape	9	Beaten	6
Hit by cars	4	Hit by cars	6
Similar dangers to boys	4	Similar dangers to girls	4
Trafficked	3	Arrested	2
Arrest	2	Robbed	2

While children perceived considerable vulnerability and risk regardless of gender, girls were perceived to be more vulnerable, especially to sexual violence.

‘Girls get raped. Boys get abused and sold.’ (R41)

‘Girls are more prone to danger. They can get their kidneys taken and are raped. Boys only get kicked and beaten.’ (R43)

‘Girls are more vulnerable than boys as when they go somewhere alone, they can be tricked by men.’ (R69)

Some children perceive boys to be more vulnerable, largely due to the agency that they are given, and the considerable violence they experience.

‘Boys are more vulnerable because they walk around more.’ (R36)

³⁷ As a methodological note, this question seemed to be somewhat confusing to children as the concepts of perception and reality are often not easily differentiated within this social and cultural context. As a result, there is a lower ‘n-value’ for these two variables with 25 children sharing perceived dangers for girls and 23 children sharing perceived dangers for boys.

‘Boys have their money extorted and are forced to sniff glue and play gambling games.’ (R66)

In addition, children were asked to describe the good and bad things about working on the street. While perceptions of ‘good things’ were largely similar between boys and girls, with most noting the opportunity to earn money, there are notable differences between what boys and girls perceive to be the ‘bad things.’ Boys were twice as likely to describe physical violence as a top ‘bad thing’ about working on the street.

4. Discussion

Disparity of power not only sits at the nexus of human trafficking, enslavement, and CRSV³⁸, but its effects continue to reverberate, and even multiply the vulnerabilities of children and young people long after periods of active conflict have reached their end. From the perspective of the many families leaving the refugee camps in the 1980s and 1990s, it may seem as though the conflict has not ended, but rather evolved to a social and economic struggle to rebuild and survive in the aftermath of trauma. Survival requires coping strategies, which often entail the normalisation of all forms of violence and use of substances to numb its far-reaching effects.

The children’s (and their families’) relationship to the border and its special economic zone plays a central role in the vulnerability they experience, offering them perceived opportunities, but providing violence and risk. Children who crossed the border demonstrated a heightened risk to physical and sexual violence. They were 2.1 times more likely to report physical violence (78% versus 36%) and 4.1 times more likely to report being hurt or threatened by a weapon (38% versus 9%) in comparison with those who solely worked on the Cambodian side of the border. Note that most children do not cross further into Thailand but are yet increasingly vulnerable.

4.1. Gender, Norms, and Vulnerability to CSEA

Gender appears to be a considerable risk factor for street-involved children, especially for boys. Boys in the data showed disproportionately higher rates of physical and sexual violence, were more likely to be engaged in

³⁸ JHEC Editorial Board, “‘The Nexus between Human Trafficking, Enslavement and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence is Obvious’: Views of the Editorial Board” (2020) 1(1) *Journal of Human Trafficking, Enslavement and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence* 5-23.

street work,³⁹ crossed the border with greater frequency, and were more likely to do so without adult supervision. While boys and girls reported similar rates of arrest in Thailand (37% and 35%, respectively), boys were more likely to describe violent confrontations with police officers, receiving threats and physical violence, often being chased back across the border and in some cases suffering injury. Girls, in contrast, were nearly twice as likely (30%) as boys (18%) to be detained by police or be taken in the 'cage car' back to the Cambodian side of the border. Being detained and repatriated through formal channels, while not without risk, allows for children to be counted as a vulnerable or repatriated child in official statistics. While there is no official 'deportation centre' on the Thai-Cambodian border, detained children were often brought to the Immigration Office in Aranyaprathet, Thailand and held until they could be repatriated.

Throughout the data, boys appear to have considerably less supervision or support from parents and carers. Nearly all girls say that their primary caretaker is their mother (62.5%), grandparents (25%), or other relatives (12.5%). In contrast, boys report a wide range of people as their primary caretaker, including siblings, extended relatives, friends, gang members,⁴⁰ and two boys to indicate they are taken care of by no one. Similarly, while 100% of the girls in the sample say that they see their primary caretaker every day, more than a fourth of boys (28%) do not see them daily, with six seeing their primary caretaker at least once a week and six at least once a month. Two say they have no primary caretaker and others simply do not respond. Many children also indicated having parents who migrate to Thailand for work, leaving children with limited or inconsistent care. This can have a considerable impact on the vulnerability of children left behind, especially those left to care for younger siblings.

Despite reporting considerably more experiences of sexual violence, boys were less likely to see themselves as vulnerable to sexual violence. Girls appear similarly unaware that this was a risk factor for boys. Rape or other forms of sexual violence was understood to be the biggest risk faced by girls on the street by both boys and girls. Despite these perceptions, boys were 4.1 times more likely to report experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation, with nearly a third (31%) disclosing sexual touching from adults, in comparison to 8% of girls (see table 4). While the overall experience of physical violence is similar between boys and girls, girls are most likely to report violence from parents or carers

³⁹ BL Rubenstein and I Stark, 'The Impact of Humanitarian Emergencies on the Prevalence of Violence against Children: An Evidence-based Ecological Framework' (2017) 22(1) *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 58-66.

⁴⁰ In Khmer, the word used here is '*bong thom*', which translates as 'older youth' or 'big brother', and is understood in context to refer to boys or young men in gangs who are violent towards some street-involved children.

and boys report violence from a wider range of offenders on the street, including ‘gangsters’.⁴¹

Table 4: Physical Violence by Gender

	Males	Females	All Children
Overall Physical Violence	35 (69%)	15 (60%)	50 (66%)
by parent or carer	9 (26%)	11 (69%)	20 (39%)
by another adult	11 (31%)	2 (13%)	13 (25%)
by police	13 (37%)	0 (0%)	13 (25%)
by ‘gangsters’	18 (51%)	1 (6%)	19 (37%)
by peers	5 (14%)	2 (13%)	7 (14%)
Being hurt or threatened with weapon	14 (29%)	6 (24%)	20 (27%)

Table 5: Sexual Violence by Gender

	Males	Females	All Children
Sexual touching by an adult	14 (31%)	2 (8%)	16 (23%)
‘More than’ sexual touching by an adult	6 (14%)	1 (4%)	7 (11%)

The perception of sexual violence for girls and physical violence for boys follows prevalent Cambodian gender norms. As in many societies, boys are often expected to be strong, dominant, and more able to protect themselves. Being a victim of sexual abuse is commonly perceived to be inconsistent with masculine norms and expectations.⁴² Physical violence, in contrast, can show a boy’s virility and strength, in support of masculine gender norms. In contrast, girls are often assumed to be weaker and more in need of protection, and a high value is placed on their chastity until marriage, often resulting in more active vigilance.

While boys are given considerably more freedom than girls, they are simultaneously afforded considerably less supervision and are often not expected to be vulnerable to sexual forms of violence.⁴³ In focus group discussions prior to data gathering, boys described similar assumptions that they were less vulnerable on the streets because they ‘were more clever’ than girls and thus knew how to run away from potential dangers. These assumptions of invulnerability can impact the decisions of migrating parents about whom to leave behind, the

⁴¹ ‘*bong thom*’ (n 40).

⁴² KG Weiss, ‘Male Sexual Victimization: Examining Men’s Experiences of Rape and Sexual Assault’ (2010) 12(3) *Men and Masculinities* 275-298.

⁴³ ECPAT International, ‘The Global Initiative to Explore the Sexual Exploitation of Boys: Thailand Report’ *ECPAT International* (2021).

purview of their supervision, and their perception of the potential harm to boys who experience sexual abuse and exploitation.

Mainstream discourse on gender, both in CSEA and CRSV circles, commonly exclude or 'mask' the experiences and vulnerabilities of men and boys as persons.⁴⁴ Theorisation on the impacts of masculine norms such as winning, emotional control, disdain for homosexuals, and self-reliance can significantly contribute to a lack of help-seeking behaviours.⁴⁵ When boys do reach out, support services may struggle to identify them as victims or lack resources to meet their needs.⁴⁶ Similarly, little consideration has been given to the various factors which inhibit males from disclosing CSEA, fearing that they have failed to live up to masculine expectations to be able to defend themselves, fearing that they will be seen as weak or that they had 'allowed themselves' to be sexually abused or exploited.⁴⁷

4.2. Coping and Survival

Poverty, sleeping on the streets, experience of violence, and drug use operate together as a potent mixture of vulnerabilities, which interact considerably within this context, fuelling one another in a cycle which amplifies the vulnerabilities of children to further abuse, exploitation, and violence. The 20% of girls and 42% of boys who sleep on the streets at least sometimes, have considerably higher rates of substance use and experiences of physical and sexual violence. Two-thirds of those who sleep on the streets at least sometimes use substances. Notable differences in substance use can be seen between youth in homes and street-living youth with 64.3% (9 out of 14) of street-living youth using substances and 20.6% (13/63) of non-street-living youth.

In the data drug use also correlates with physical violence with 95% of drug-using children citing instances of physical violence in comparison to 54% among non-users. Physical violence came from gangs (68%), police (50%), and 'other adults' (41%). Sexual violence is also strongly correlated with 68% of drug-using children citing sexual violence in comparison with 10% among non-users. Furthermore, 73% of children who use drugs were shown pornographic images by adults in comparison with 18% of non-drug-using children. This is significant in that pornography is commonly used by perpetrators of CSEA to groom children for sexual exploitation (Fordham, 2005). This is supported by nearly one-

44 JP Dennis, 'Women Are Victims, Men Make Choices: The Invisibility of Men and Boys in the Global Sex Trade' (2008) 25(11-25) *Gender Issues* 11-12.

45 JR Mahalik, B Locke, LH Ludlow, MA Diemer, RPJ Scott et al, 'Development of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory' (2003) 4(1) *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 3-25.

46 ME Addis and JR Mahalik, 'Men, Masculinity, and the Contexts of Help-Seeking' (2003) 58(1) *American Psychologist* 5-14.

47 ECPAT International (n 43).

third (30%) of drug users who noted being offered food, money, or gifts in exchange for providing sexual services to adults, in comparison to 4% of non-drug users. This link between sexual violence and use of substances was also clear in a previous study carried out in Chiang Mai⁴⁸ where the rates of sexual abuse toward drug-users was found to be significantly higher in comparison with those that were not consuming any substances.

In addition to high rates of violence, family/social connection is notably lower among drug-users in Poipet. Drug users were significantly less likely to stay with family members at night (29% versus 66% among non-users) and significantly more likely to sleep on the streets (43% versus 9% among non-users). Furthermore, most drug-using children (78%) described turning to friends, peers, or gang members when they felt angry or sad, and 16% (three children) described that they have no one to go to. In contrast, the majority of non-drug-using children (77%) described a variety of family members including parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and stepparents in whom they find emotional support.

More than a third of the sample (36%) reported staying at home or having an improved connection with their families as helpful for stopping drug use. This aligns with global research. A stable family serves as a protective factor in terms of overcoming emotional distress in future life and favouring resilience.⁴⁹ Recovery from addiction, as well as preventing new addictions, often lies in attempts to reconnect people with others and break the sense of isolation. This seems to be especially challenging for the boys in this sample, as they are particularly vulnerable to being left alone, placing them at a greater risk of violence—especially sexual violence and drug misuse. Considering the often-chaotic environment and tumultuous living situations, along with the pressure to earn money and the high rates of economic migration, children and families in Poipet may struggle to develop strong and consistent bonds with one another. Children feeling isolated or disconnected from their families/caretakers may attempt to find family within their peer groups or use substances to numb the feelings of sadness or isolation, to relieve psychological or emotional pressure, or otherwise escape from their present reality. These conditions exacerbate the vulnerability of children to all forms of violence and may lead survivors to agree to sexual exploitation under trafficking conditions.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Davis, Fiss and Miles (n 19).

⁴⁹ United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (2012), 'The State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World' (2012) <<https://www.unicef.org/sowc2012/>> accessed 1 November 2021.

⁵⁰ C Dolan, 'While the Nexus is Obvious, its Recognition, Documentation and Tackling is Not' (2020) 1(1) *Journal of Human Trafficking, Enslavement and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence* 5-23.

5. Conclusion

The long-term evidence of genocide, war, and the frequent displacement of people in the rapidly changing border area, ensures that the effects of conflict only reverberate and multiply rather than becoming more stable. This research demonstrates the nexus between post-conflict, conflict related sexual violence, and the economic consequences of a country which has been made poorer by war, genocide, and the cascading effects of poverty. This is particularly seen in and around the Special Economic and Free Trade Zone, which has benefited from rapid international investment and growth, particularly from China, Thailand, and South Korea. This amplifies the social and economic disparities locally and disproportionately impacts street-involved families. As in many countries around the world, the wealth ends up in the hands of a small minority and often provides little real benefit to working families in the local area.

This context creates a fertile environment for human trafficking, enslavement, and CRSV to grow and thrive.⁵¹ Young children are vulnerable to labour exploitation and *enslavement*, including scavenging, begging, transporting goods across the border, among other things. Boys and girls are vulnerable to childhood sexual exploitation and trafficking within the special economic zone. The economic migration of parents makes children more vulnerable to CSEA and other forms of violence, particularly among those left behind. Simultaneously, parents are also vulnerable to *human trafficking* or other legal risks as undocumented immigrants in Thailand.⁵²

Data from this study also shows boys to face unique and pronounced vulnerabilities to CSEA, while resisting the perception of being vulnerable, which may lead to less supervision and support, thus exacerbating their vulnerabilities. In future research, it would be helpful to explore the impact of such assumptions on male vulnerability to sexual violence, particularly among street-involved children.

6. Recommendations

National and Local Government in Cambodia and Thailand

Greater collaboration is needed with Cambodian law enforcement and child protection agents to ensure that boys are safely detained when encountering law enforcement and humanely returned to the Cambodian side

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Sampson and Miles (n 9).

of the border when they are apprehended in Thailand. Training is needed for border guards and police in child rights and treating all children with dignity, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status.

We endorse suggestions by Sampson and Miles in their research which proposes to the Cambodian Foreign Ministry and the Thai Ministry of Industry that a Temporary Migrant Worker Scheme would be low-bureaucracy and low-cost and would allow migrant workers to undertake short-term documented occupations. This policy uses the theoretical basis of ‘win-win-win’ migration theory discourse, in which migration schemes are advantageous to the receiving country, host country, and migrants.

NGOs and Community Organisations

Children’s rights organisations should employ a diverse range of strategies focused on community-building and social connectedness to help improve the lives of street-involved children and families. NGOs and schools should collaborate to develop after school clubs, youth groups, and peer-mentorship initiatives to reach these groups. NGOs should work with religious and community leaders to provide safe spaces for children to meet together in youth and children’s groups with positive peer pressure.

There is a need to develop and utilise strong local educational resources normalising the vulnerability of boys and young men,⁵³ as well as gender-inclusive resources for parents, teachers, and support workers, that challenge social norms for and about boys and young men, including victim identification tools that are sensitive to males. Training and education may also be needed for support workers about sexual abuse and exploitation of girls *and* boys and what to do if a child discloses.

As tourism and foreign investment in Poipet continues to grow, families are under increased pressure to generate income to meet their basic needs. Within this context, many children were pressured to take jobs within industries where they may be at increased risk for sexual exploitation.

Law Enforcement

NGOs and government should work together to build stronger relations with border police and security in Thailand and Cambodia, providing training, gender inclusive victim identification tools, and advocating for children’s rights—particularly for drug using children. Current laws should be better implemented to prosecute traffickers and offenders of CSEA and monitoring systems should improve to recognise the considerable vulnerabilities

⁵³ eg <www.goodtouchbadtouchflipchart.org> accessed 1 November 2021.

of unhoused children in the context of the growth and investment in the border's SEZ. Child protection systems, such as the Child Safe network,⁵⁴ which relies on a network of trained individuals within the travel and tourism sector may need updating and reinvestment to meet this community's rapidly changing needs.

Future Research

The nexus between the ongoing chaos of the post-conflict setting, including human trafficking, enslavement, and sexual violence is under considered in research.⁵⁵ This situation requires more attention throughout all sectors, particularly among children who have migrated deeper to Thailand. More research is needed with children and youth who are working within the SEZ, particularly within the hotels, casinos, and beer gardens where CSEA appears to be increasing. Future research should also explore the experiences of Cambodian children who were arrested and detained in Thailand, exploring the connections between arrest, child trauma, and both positive and negative coping strategies. In addition, research on the children left behind by migrating parents is needed to explore the potential disconnect felt by children and its impact regarding substance use issues and other negative coping mechanisms.

⁵⁴ <<http://thinkchildsafe.org>> accessed 1 November 2021.

⁵⁵ Editorial Board JHEC (n 38).