

The struggle to belong

Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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**Coming of Age on the Streets. An Exploration of the Livelihoods of
Street Youth in Durban**

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Abstract

The phenomenon of young people working or living on the streets of cities in the 'majority world' has been the focus of intense academic attention. However, most research focuses on the situation of children and young adolescents, while fewer studies analyse how life on the street is experienced and changes when these young people enter youth or adulthood. As a consequence, this paper explicitly deals with the livelihoods of youth and young adults (16-28 years) working and/or living on the streets of Durban, South Africa. The empirical research reported in this paper has shown that despite an array of risks and constraints faced in their everyday lives, young people on the streets are not destitute, but develop complex livelihood strategies to cope with their situation. For this, they draw on a variety of different - mainly informal or even illegal - activities in public space and form supportive social networks. This paper also discusses the participants changing street careers and analyses in how far the process of growing up and becoming an adult influences their decisions and behaviour.

Background

International attention on the issue of children and youth working and living on the streets started to rise in the wake of the "International year of the child" 1979. Since then not only have aid programmes and projects been established but the issue has also been the focus of intense academic interest (Ansell 2005; Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003). In the last three decades of work and research on children and youth on the streets a shift of paradigms has taken place. The focus has recently been placed onto young people's agency, seeing them as competent actors and agents of their own lives. It has also been recognised that despite their limited opportunities and marginalization, young people on the streets still manage to assert agency over their lives and develop complex coping strategies to sustain their livelihoods. Thus, they are not seen as problems anymore – either as helpless victims or perpetrators of crimes – but as competent social actors who interact with a variety of environments (Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003).

The growing interest of geographers in the issue has also directed attention to the influence of time and space on the street child's experience, seeing temporal and spatial structures as being integral to the production and reproduction of their realities (Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003). Therefore, the livelihoods of young people on the street should be analysed in relation to the spaces they use, as well as their age and length of stay on the streets. There are people of different age groups visible in the cities and street children grow-up to become youth and adults with changing needs and vulnerabilities. Because of this, their changing careers on the streets have to be considered and their increasing age has to be regarded as an important influence on their livelihoods (Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003; Marquez 1999). Table 1, adapted from Ennew & Swart-Kruger (2003), summarises this shift of paradigms in the academic discourse and outlines the theoretical and methodological considerations this paper is based upon.

SHIFTING FROM IDEAS THAT:	THROUGH IDEAS OF:	TO THE FOLLOWING CONSEQUENCES:	
		<i>THEORY</i>	<i>RESEARCH</i>
Street youth are homeless and abandoned victims or perpetrators of crime	<i>Space</i>	Street youth create meaning for using public spaces and form supportive networks that are crucial for their livelihoods	A variety of triangulated methods: Observation, interviews, focus group discussions, visual methods
Street youth's lives are chaotic; they are/will become delinquents	<i>Time</i>	They have changing street careers; their increasing age is an important factor in their decision making	Life story interviews
Adults know best; adult control and supervision is necessary to ensure youths' welfare	<i>Social construction of meaning; agency</i>	Youths are active agents in their own lives; they construct meanings and are subjects of rights	A youth centred approach applying participatory methods.

Tab.1: Shifting paradigms in work and research with street youth
Source: adapted from Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003

In this paper I want to focus on the livelihoods of youth and young adults (16-28 years) on the streets of Durban. The youth and their actions are at the centre of this study and it is examined how they sustain their livelihoods amidst the risks and constraints experienced. Livelihoods in this case are understood as not just comprising mere survival but include further needs and priorities of people. Obtaining food and shelter alone do not explain all livelihood strategies and activities. In fact, as Wallman (1984 cited in Appendini 2001, 25) put it, the tasks of meeting obligations, of security, identity and status, and organizing time are as crucial to livelihoods as bread and shelter and thus have to be included into the analysis.

Theoretical considerations

Urban Livelihoods and Public Space

The livelihoods of the poor are predominantly shaped by the political, social and economic contexts they live in, as they determine the assets accessible to them (Meikle 2002). One of the assets the urban poor rely on is urban public space. As a place of trade and interaction it is not just a key element to their physical capital, but also to their economic and social capital as well. Thus, having access to public space becomes a question of survival (Brown & Lloyd-Jones 2002). However, public space is subject to extensive regulation and control. It is contested and bound up with power relations existing between different groups. (Brown & Lloyd-Jones 2002, Conticini 2007) As a

result, the urban poor may have physical access to the spaces in the city, but not to the activities that take place there (Brown & Lloyd-Jones 2002). Enforcement of municipal by-laws on activities such as street trading, begging or vagrancy can thus deprive certain groups of their livelihoods (Daly 1998; Narsoo 2004).

In the case of young people on the streets, the public space of the city fulfils many different functions. It's their place of work, sleep, recreation, as well as a place of situative learning, socialization and personal enrichment (Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003). They also use public space as a means to assert their independent identities and identify and appropriate different urban niches to use for survival and recreation (van Blerk 2005; Beazley 2003). At the same time, street youth are particularly vulnerable to measures aimed at a stricter regulation and control of these spaces. Since the presence of especially (male) youth and young adults on the streets is generally regarded as a threat to social order and security, authorities feel increasingly obliged to clean up the streets from these supposedly deviant groups (Valentine 2004; Samara 2005; van Blerk 2005). This, however, means to dispossess them of a major asset needed for securing their livelihoods.

Youth and life-course

Youth as a distinct stage in the life course is often defined in relation to adulthood. It is regarded as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood in which young people negotiate – through a number of interrelated transitions - their transition from dependence (childhood) to independence (adulthood). These transitions mainly comprise the move from school to seeking work and economic independence; moving from parental home to new living arrangements or forming close relationships outside the family, often resulting in marriage and own parenthood (see e.g. Richter et al. 2005; Raithel 2004).

Despite its usefulness as an analytical instrument to explore youth's decision-making processes in relation to the wider socio-cultural and political context, the concept has its weaknesses – especially when applied to a 'majority world' context. First of all its based on Western ideals of youth that are being exported to non-Western contexts where resources to adequately reproduce these ideals are missing (Ruddick 2003). Most 'successful' transitions such as entering the formal labour market and establishing one's own home are hard to accomplish for young people in poverty. Many of them are excluded from school and the labour market in which the transition to adulthood is institutionalised. Secondly, while transitions in the West are becoming longer and may well continue into one's 30s, disadvantaged adolescents living in poverty in the 'majority world' may be forced to assume adult responsibilities already at a young age (Ruddick 2003, 340; Lloyd et al. 2005, 41; Tyyskä 2005, 4). Child headed households, working children or (street) children and youth leaving parental guidance at an early age may serve as examples for this. In line with this, Skelton (2002) argues that transitions to adulthood have to be defined in less narrow terms to include young people who never fitted the conventional understandings of this concept; for example those who do not follow a linear progression from school-to-work, but choose 'alternative careers' and less conventional means of gaining independence.

Growing older on the streets

Life on the street does not remain static. Young people living there develop so-called street careers during which they learn to adapt to street life. At the same time, with the passing years and their increasing age their needs and thus actions and behaviour change. For example questions of how to earn an income or to reach goals, like founding an own household and family, become more prevalent. In her work on street youth in Caracas, Márquez (1999) identified clear differences in the behaviour of younger and older youth, stating that older youth become increasingly interested "among other things, in women, larger amounts of money, other types of drugs, or a safer life" (Márquez 1999, 52). She also points out that they are more concerned about their looks and clothing style.

A second factor associated with growing older on the streets concerns society's and especially authorities' response to adolescent street dwellers. While the general perception of children on the streets is strongly influenced by feelings of sympathy and the notion that they should not be there, groups of older youth, especially adolescent males, are regarded as dangerous and criminal – as a threat that should be dealt with by police. These perceptions may limit their ability to sustain livelihoods in two ways: first of all, their presence in public space is less likely to be tolerated; secondly, income-generating activities that rely on the public's sympathy or trust become harder to access or less lucrative (Mufune 2000; Butler 2007). In addition, when reaching the majority age (18 in South Africa) police are generally rougher on them and they have to expect more severe consequences for transgressions compared to younger children (see also Rizzini & Butler 2003; Márquez 1999).

Methodology

There are several considerations that are essential for successful research with young people on the street. They mainly refer to questions of gaining the youth's trust, to the validity of the data collected and to ethical principles that are important when doing research with vulnerable young people. These points have been discussed in detail for example by Bemak (1996), Aptekar & Heinonen (2003), van Beers (1996) and Schenk & Williamson (2005) and served as guiding principles for my research.

The main objective of this research was to gain in-depth understanding of how life on the street is experienced by the youths themselves. In order to achieve this, a qualitative, multiple-method approach was used to obtain data. The methods used included in-depth life story interviews, semi-structured and informal interviews, focus group discussions and participatory and visual methods, such as thematic drawings, cause-and-effect diagrams, daily activity schedules and photography. The NGO Umthombo Street Children provided me with a research assistant and facilitated building rapport. This not only served as an invaluable safety net but also helped increase my credibility among the participants.

The empirical research for this paper was conducted in Durban, South Africa between August and November 2007. Twenty-seven young men and women (three female, twenty-four male

participants), aged sixteen to twenty-seven years, took part in the study. Interviews with key informants from NGOs, national and municipal government institutions, churches, the police and the courts supplemented the data to increase validity. Principles of informed consent, confidentiality and doing no harm served as guiding ethical principals for the research process.

Street youths in Durban

Research area

Durban is the major urban, political and economical centre of eThekweni Municipality, located in the province of KwaZulu Natal. With an estimated population of slightly more than three million people it is the second largest urban agglomeration in South Africa (Marx & Charlton 2003). eThekweni has a very youthful population: 31 % fall into the Municipality's category of youth (15 – 28 years); 27 % of the population are under 15 years old. 44% of the population are classified as poor, affecting Africans disproportionately (Marx & Charlton 2003). Women are three times more likely to fall into the 'extremely poor' category than men and children are regarded as the most vulnerable to poverty with half of all children being identified as poor (EM 2006).

Estimates on the extent of the street child phenomenon in the research location are the following: in 2004 the 'National Alliance for Street Children' conducted a census in KwaZulu Natal counting 5964 children and youth under the age of 18 in street children shelters, drop-in centres and on the street (NASC 2006). Recent estimates by the NGO Umthombo Street Children state that there are currently about 200 children under the age of 18 staying on Durban's streets. Numbers including youths up to 28 years (the eThekweni / Durban municipality defines people between 15 and 28 years as being youths) are not available. There exist a number of very good projects supporting street children and youth (Umthombo, iCare, Youth for Christ, Street Wise, SCOPES) in the city. However, most of them focus on work with children or young adolescents and street children shelters only take young people up to the age of 16¹.

The empirical research in this study was limited to the inner-city area of Durban. Durban Point and the Durban Beachfront served as the two main research areas. They comprise a high number of street youth in the city, with Durban Point - especially it's Northern Part - being regarded as the place where street life is concentrated. While South Point has been upgraded in an ambitious urban renewal programme, the northern part of Point is still a problematic area with high levels of crime. Along the former Point Road (renamed to Mahatma Gandhi Road in 2007) there are several vacant buildings used by vagrants and street youth as sleeping places. In the past they have also served as a hub for illegal prostitution, criminal activity and drug trade. The land use at Durban Point is mainly characterised by a mixture of residential and commercial areas, with commercial use being dominant (phone and pawnshops, fast-food outlets, escort agencies, gambling halls). In an interview, eThekweni City Manager Mike Sutcliff explained that the northern part of Durban Point is a future target area of urban upgrading especially with regard to the FIFA World Cup 2010.

¹ iCare as well as Umthombo have now started to build projects that aim at providing youth up to 25 years with skills and integrating them into the labour market.

The Durban Beachfront, also called the Golden Mile, on the other hand, is the city's main tourist attraction. Most of the street youth activities along the beach concentrate on: washing and guarding cars in the parking spaces along the upper promenade; begging in front of restaurants and bars; or doing chores for the street vendors selling from stalls along the promenade. There is high police presence along the beachfront as a means to increase security.

Leaving home and coming to the streets

The causes contributing to children and youth leaving home and seeking a life on the streets are diverse. Socio-economic and political conditions as well as historical developments form the context in which the youth's decisions to leave are embedded². The immediate reasons, however, why a young person escapes to the street, varies from one individual to the other. Therefore, one must be cautious about making any generalisations. The same holds true for one-dimensional explanations that limit the phenomenon to a mere problem of poverty. Earlier research on street children and youth has pointed out that although the phenomenon mostly occurs against a backdrop of poverty, material deprivation alone is not a sufficient explanatory factor for children leaving home. Adjacent causes have to be considered that influence young people's decision to leave their homes. Young (2004) and Swart-Kruger & Donald (1994) furthermore claim that the youngster's own decisions in migrating to the cities have to be acknowledged.

With the exception of two, all of the twenty-seven participants of this study moved to the city for the first time when they were under the majority age of 18. The participants described their home places as being former townships or rural areas in South Africa, mainly KwaZulu-Natal. Two participants said to come from the Eastern Cape, another two had their homes in Gauteng province. One of the participants was from Maputo, Mozambique. Their decisions to migrate to and stay on the streets were usually not just motivated by one single factor, but governed by a combination of different causes. They ranged from death of parents, domestic violence and problems in school to drug addiction, pregnancy and poverty. (Political) violence in their hometowns, having committed a crime and more economically motivated causes such as finding work were highlighted as well. Finding employment, supporting or easing the financial burdens on their families, as well as lack of perspective and boredom at home influenced especially older youth's (16 – 20 years) decisions to migrate. Adding to this were normative perceptions of adulthood and the feeling that they have certain obligations to meet when growing up. Consequently, the street was regarded as a place where they could escape to from poverty in their homes and that could provide the resources to negotiate their status as adults.

"My parents have passed away so I stayed with my granny. There were five of us and money was always short. So I thought I have to find work, to help and support my granny and the other children. Because you can't stay there when you get older without supporting yourself and your family. So, I tried to earn some money in the city. Where I come from there are only farms and you can't find a job. This is why I came to the city because here there are different opportunities to make some money (Julius, 22, male).

² A detailed analysis of the causes of the street youth phenomenon in Durban can be found in Scherthner 2009, including the structural and underlying factors at the core of the issue.

One young man also expressed pride in the fact that he has taken action against unemployment in his home community. He emphasised that society's negative image of street youth does not acknowledge their effort in trying to change their situation:

People sit at home with matric [matriculation] but no job. They do nothing. They are as old as we are but their parents or grandparents have to buy them food, clothes and everything. I cannot do this when I am grown up. I had to come here to work on my own and not taking my parents money anymore" (Sipho 25yrs, male).

In general, it turned out that although most of the older youth regarded their present situation in the city as dissatisfying and harsh, returning home to their family households was only seen as an option, if they were able to live independently and had their own income. Attraction to city life, which was regarded as the antithesis to the monotony experienced in their home places, was another, not immediate, but still indirect reason for remaining in the town centre. The beachfront, malls, bars and nightclubs presented leisure time infrastructure that could most of the time not be found in their home communities.

Problems of Street Life

The street of the inner cities is a survival space; and although the city may offer opportunities, street life is still characterised by a lot of problems. Young street dwellers are in a highly vulnerable position. The hardships experienced by the young people taking part in this research mainly refer to their financial and legal status; to their physical well being and security; to society's reaction to them as well as to their personal and emotional development³.

Lack of regular income was listed as a major constraint to improving their present situation and to achieve future goals. Finding employment that was reasonably paid was thus brought up as a priority need. However, none of the twenty-seven participants had completed secondary education (*matric*) and only a small number had vocational training courses. This means that they did not fulfil important requirements for entering the formal labour market. Moreover, more than half of them claimed not to have valid documents (ID). This not only restricted them from finding work but also made it impossible to apply for informal business permits or social security grants.

The participants also had to deal with serious risks to their health, since they were lacking appropriate shelter and were exposed to violence. The three women taking part in the study highlighted the danger of sexual abuse, with one young woman disclosing that she had been raped on the streets. Adding to this, diseases and injuries often remained untreated, either because medical assistance was not consulted, or difficult to access for them.

The participants furthermore claimed that they feel rejected and looked-down on by the public and have experienced abuse and aggressive behaviour. Thabo, 27, complained in an interview that the portrayal of street kids in the public is completely one-dimensional and reduces them to dangerous

³ A detailed description of the problems and risks of the participants can be found in Schemthaler (2009)

criminals and glue sniffers. He added that they never get the chance to correct this image since people do not listen to them:

"Some people don't like us; they say street kids are the criminals, they sniff glue and they are dangerous. But they are missing the point. They don't sit down with us and listen" (Thabo, 27 yrs, male).

Harassment by the police and being prevented from pursuing their income earning activities in public space was listed as a major problem as well. Especially young men over the age of 18 complained about this. They stated that police regularly arrest them for vagrancy and also chase them away from especially those places that offer the best opportunities to make a living – the beachfront or busy shopping streets. In the parks on the contrary, where their presence was more likely to be tolerated, their opportunities to generate income were limited:

„I don't like it when I see the police truck. Too often they come and wake us up. [...] They say: ‚You are robbers but we arrest you for loitering‘. [...] They don't take the younger boys or the girls. Mainly us older guys over 18“ (Mandla, male, 19).

„At night I stay in the park but during the day Point Road is where everything is happening. You ask for food in front of the food places or ask the car drivers for money at the robots. There are the small shops and bars where you can sell stuff or buy cigarettes. There are so many people around, who may give you something, even a job. But in the park there is little to do during the day and no money to make“ (Sanele, male, 24).

Working and living on the streets

With limited access to the formal labour market and without support from parental caregivers, the twenty-seven young men and women had to develop alternative strategies to cope with their vulnerable situation. Most of their livelihood activities were organized around the public spaces of the city. They had knowledge about the opportunities at hand in their physical and social environment and transformed them into income. They also did not just engage in one single activity but drew upon different tasks to secure their livelihoods. This diversification of activities reduced dependence on just one source of income. The participants' accounts also illustrated that their activities are not only pursued to earn income but also to receive food, clothes, shelter or information. One participant, for example, pointed out that by regularly assisting vendors at the beachfront he won their trust. As a consequence, they allowed him to sleep in a room where they store their goods.

A number of odd jobs such as doing chores for shops, local businesses, flat owners or street vendors were among the youth's main sources of income. Other ways of earning money were working as day labourers in the construction sector or temporal employment in different formal businesses. They mainly accessed these jobs through social contacts, which they had established on the streets, or through support from non-governmental organisations. Of likewise importance were informal sector activities that required little capital input such as guarding and washing cars. Nine of the twenty-seven participants mentioned that these two activities presented their main

sources of income. The parking spaces along the Golden Mile were considered as the most profitable places for washing and guarding cars. Due to this, competition for working there was said to be high, and by-laws regulating these activities exacerbated the situation. Only one of the participants was regularly working in informal trade, selling crafts along the beachfront. Three of the participants found formal work during the time of the research, one as a security guard in Durban, the other two as workers in a factory in the neighbouring New Germany.

Apart from organizing money, food and clothes, finding shelter posed another challenge to the youth. Most of them reported that they spend the nights in a park, on the pavements of quiet streets or along the beachfront. Shelter could also be found in vacant buildings and closed down shops. These, however, were often overcrowded and characterized by tenuous safety conditions and lack of sanitary facilities. Another possibility mentioned only by three participants was renting a sleeping place in one of the private shelters around Durban Point (15 – 20 Rand⁴ for accommodation in a dormitory per night). The high costs were the main reason why not more of the youth decided to sleep in a shelter. However, in individual interviews also other considerations more closely connected to the youth's personal objectives were cited. From these accounts it could be inferred that they had other priorities than having a secure sleeping place. Bheki, for example, who earned low but still regular income as a security guard at the time of the research, was still sleeping at the beachfront. He had other plans for spending his money than paying for a room: *„I want to send money to my mother, so I save money from the shelter for this. It's my duty to support her now. This is more important to me than having a bed.“*

Street Crime

The question of whether and to what extent street children and youth are engaged in criminal activities generally gains much attention. According to UN-HABITAT "[s]treet children and youth are both victims and perpetrators of crime in cities due to survival needs and exposure to cultures of violence, including deviant peer behaviour" (UN-HABITAT 2007, 76). Group discussions and interviews conducted for this paper have revealed that pursuing crime was or had been part of some of the youth's survival strategies, at least at different periods of their street careers. However, the meaning of crime for livelihoods differed among the participants. While some said not to do any crime at all, others disclosed to have been involved in occasional pick-pocketing, shop lifting or claimed to sell small amounts of *zol* (marijuana) to complement their income from other activities. Seven of the participants admitted to do crime on a more regular basis, including theft, robbery, smash-and-grab robberies and selling drugs.

No clear evidence could be found that becoming older on the street leads to becoming a criminal. There were examples to prove the opposite, with young people stating that they had committed crimes during their street careers but had abandoned this behaviour completely, since this was not the way they saw their futures. Therefore, the common notion that the streets are 'schools of crime' and that with their increasing age and time spent on the streets children will inevitably grow up to be criminals was not confirmed (see also Swart 1988 cited in Chetty 1994,58).

⁴ ZAR15 ~ € 1,2; ZAR20 ~ € 1,56

Survival and the absence of legal income-earning opportunities were listed as the main, but not exclusive, reasons behind street youth's involvement in crime. The participants regarded it as the sometimes only option left for survival. However, other explanation could be found as well. First of all, crime was considered to be more profitable than other activities. Secondly, interviews and observations of street life revealed that money obtained through theft or robbery was often spent in bars, nightclubs or for buying clothes. In the centre of the city the youth are permanently confronted with uncountable consumption opportunities and have therefore developed a longing for possessing consumer goods and status symbols (see also Richter et al. 2005) . Since financial means to acquire these by legal means are absent, some of them resort to crime⁵. Sibusiso (male, 23), who had been in prison for several years, mentioned that this can be one cause why young people engage in illegal activities:

Michael: Why do you think so many young people go to prison here?

Sibusiso: I am young as well I know how it is. Many don't have a job or never went to school.

[...] And the problem is we love to have the money, we love to have this and that, we love to enjoy life. We see many things everyday we would like to have and to get them we have to do things. This is why we are rushing things, doing crime" (Sibusiso, 23, male).

Having money to impress women or to support a girlfriend were other motivations for committing crimes. Among the male participants the opinion that a man has to provide for a girlfriend was widespread, as Bonginkosi's statement demonstrates:

"For a girlfriend you need money. They want a place to stay, nice things, and nice food. A man has to support them. For this you cannot just be a guy on the streets. Or you do crime and sell drugs" (Bonginkosi, 24, male)

Street groups

Forming social networks - being part of a street youth group - is a key component of street youth's livelihood strategies. These networks offer support in fulfilling basic needs such as food, shelter and physical security. They also satisfy their emotional needs for companionship, closeness and protection and are an important source of identity (Swart-Kruger & Donald 1994b; Woodhead 1999).

The twenty-seven participants belonged to different groups, differing in size and make-up. This was considered to be of the utmost importance, particularly when being a young boy or girl on the street. According to the participants, social networks play an important role in learning to survive and they also offer protection against violence. They added that the group provides a feeling of belonging, and could be observed that the participants have developed strong solidarity among

⁵ In an interview, Siswe Hlatshwayo, director of YMCA Amanzimtoti, who operates a halfway house for young offenders and street youth over the age of 18, stated that " [t]he boys that come in here are like other youth, concerned about their appearance and are really style and fashion conscious. They go window shopping and see the things they want but can not afford them, so they maybe just steal them".

each other. Acquiring status and respect among their peers can thus be understood as a coping mechanism against the discrimination, distrust and marginalisation they experience in their daily lives.

„We are the dirt of the town! That's what people think. But my friends they know who I really am and I care more what they think. So we stay together and support each other“ (Sithembiso, 27, male).

But their social ties were not always just seen as a positive thing. Relations within the groups were reported to be strained at times and conflicts and arguments were common. Life-story interviews have also revealed that street youth groups are very fluid in their make-up and most of the participants had been members of different groups during their street careers. Moreover, with their increasing age and time spent on the streets they have developed changing attitudes towards the group. While all of them still considered having close and supportive relationships on the streets as very important, it could be inferred from interviews that cutting ties with former group affiliations was a step to distance themselves from the image of being 'street kids'. Spending time in large groups was seen as incompatible with seeking a more stable lifestyle and becoming an adult.

Changing Street Careers

During their street careers the participants have adopted new behaviours while old ones were abandoned. For example, while sniffing glue was common among street children in Durban, most of the older youth had learned to do without it. Instead, some of them have started taking other drugs such as *zol* or, in some cases, even hard drugs. Street careers also took turns whenever they left the cities temporarily because they spent some time at home, in a children's shelter or in prison. After returning to the streets they often found themselves in new groups and adopted new behaviours.

With the passing years young people on the streets also find new ways of earning income, while others become less important. The changing significance of begging as a coping strategy in street youth's lives exemplifies this. Although asking pedestrians for food and money presented a survival activity for street dwellers of all age groups in Durban, it was more common among young adolescents. This can be ascribed to two reasons. First, children on the street evoke more sympathy and so attract money more easily. This means that begging becomes less profitable the older people get (or let's say taller and thus more threatening to the public). Second, begging was considered a demeaning activity that is based on presenting oneself as helpless and weak. This would have contradicted the image that the older youth had of themselves as grown-ups:

"When older something in you changes. You don't want to beg anymore, you feel ashamed, you don't want that they think you can do nothing than beg (Mandla, 19, male).

Street careers might also develop in completely opposite directions as the stories of Bheki and Thulani demonstrate. Bheki moved from begging and doing crime on the streets to completely

abandoning these two activities and eventually found formal employment as a security guard. He also expressed clear goals for his future, and because he was discontent with his present employment took active steps to find a new job. He had also re-established ties with his family and used part of his income to support his mother. Starting with begging for food and money on the street, later moving on to become a petty thief and robber, he finally managed to (at least for the time being) stabilise his life style. Thulani, on the other hand, who had left home for the streets more than ten years earlier, explained that his life was mainly characterized by crime and imprisonment. He could not really see a future for himself outside of street life: *„I am going in and out of prison since years. I often rob. What else should I do if I have not learned anything?“*

Conclusion

The empirical research reported in this paper shows that the street serves a number of functions in street youth's lives and is both a place of risks as well as (at least some) opportunities. First of all, young people on the streets face many problems. Violence, poverty and susceptibility to illnesses are among them. But they are not completely helpless and have adopted coping strategies that allow them to deal with these problems. They are able to access opportunities for earning income and find a sense of belonging and status among their peers. Apart from this, many street youth come to the cities because they run away from intolerable or even hazardous conditions in their homes. Due to this, the street cannot just be portrayed as the anti-social, amoral and hazardous 'other' in contrast to conceptions of the home as a place of security and compassion. A much more differentiated understanding of 'the street' and 'the home' is required that acknowledges the youth's own perception of these two domains (see also e.g. Shanahan 2003; Ennew & Swart-Kruger 2003).

Applying a life-course perspective on research with street youth has also proved to be helpful in gaining a better understanding of their lives. In this context, questions of changing needs and priorities in different stages of the life-course become increasingly important, because they have influence on the decisions they take. The results from this study have demonstrated for example that the youth attribute high importance to their (financial) independence because they regard it as a constitutive element of becoming an adult. But at the same time they also have the desire to be 'youth'. They want to take part in urban youth culture by going out or wearing fashionable clothes. They long for respect and status. Thus, youth and young adults on the streets are in a difficult position. They have to manage their survival and at the same time negotiate their status as youth and their transition to adulthood. Because of this, projects supporting young adults and youth on the streets should acknowledge that being a youth and becoming an adult is linked to specific characteristics. This means that programmes have to be tailored to the needs of this age group. They should first of all aim at strengthening their agency and self-esteem by providing them with skills and resources that would enable them to build sustainable livelihoods. Apart from vocational training this could also include equipping them with business skills and support for starting small

informal sector enterprises. A further point is that projects also have to recognise that street youth's lives are not only about survival. Instead of ONLY focusing on their basic needs and preparing them for work, programmes should also address topics like relationship, sex, identity, gender, popular culture and consumerism.

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