



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

# “Where Do You Want Us to Go?”

Abuses against Street Children in Uganda

# SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS





Street children in Mbale town, east of Kampala sleep on shop verandas after owners have closed for the day.





# **“Where Do You Want Us to Go?”**

**Abuses Against Street Children In Uganda**

*Photographs © 2014 Edward Echwalu*

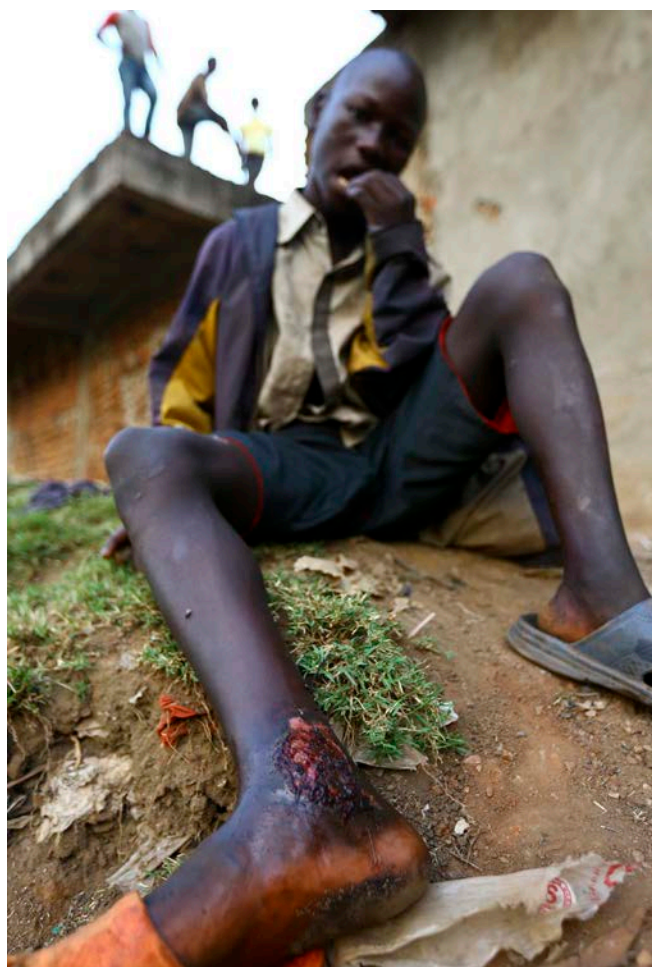


*These police have to give us our rights. They should make us a home where we can be taken, but let it not be a police station, let it not have policemen so that it is not a prison. This is our country too. Let us not be strangers in our own country.*

—Zachary L., 16-year-old from Bugembe town, Jinja district, seven years living on the street, February 2014

*Government structures should not just be there in name. They should function. In Kampala, apart from beating them up, the government is doing nothing [for street children]. If all systems were working, you would not see these children suffering.*

—Manager of a nongovernmental organization's center for street children outside Kampala, February 2014



A 13-year-old boy in Mbale was injured in an assault by a woman from the community, who wrongly accused him of theft. The boy has spent eight years on the streets and has previously been beaten by security personnel and members of the community. Though he was in pain, he did not have money for medical treatment.

When 13-year-old Stephen B.'s father died, his older brother did not want to care for him and sent him to look for his mother. But he got lost on a trip looking for her and decided to approach the police in Masaka town for help. They offered no assistance. Without money or contacts, Stephen turned to the streets, and one year after, he remained homeless. Stephen said that he feared his encounters with the police more than anything else during this period. "One day, I was sleeping and four policemen came and started beating me. They beat me so badly on the ankles, knees, and elbows that I couldn't move. They also beat my friends who were sleeping. Then one policeman said 'Who has money so that we leave you alone?' [My friend] Moses had 500 shillings (US\$0.20). The policeman took it. This happens always in the night."

Uganda has one of the largest populations of young people in the world with over 56 percent of its 37 million people under the age of 18, and more than 52 per-

cent under age 15. Children are also the single largest demographic group living in poverty in Uganda. According to civil society groups who assist street children, local government officials, and police officers of the Child and Family Protection Unit who are tasked to focus on children, the number of Ugandan children living on the streets is increasing. But the total number of street children is unknown.

Children living on the streets in the capital, Kampala, and throughout Uganda's urban centers face violence and discrimination by police, local government officials,



their peers, and the communities in which they work and live. Some left home because of domestic abuse, neglect, and poverty, only to suffer brutality and exploitation by older children and homeless adults on the streets. They often lack access to clean water, food, medical attention, shelter, and education.

This report is based on interviews in seven towns across Uganda with more than 130 current or former children who live or work on the streets, known generally as street children. Some spend their days and nights on the streets. Others work on the streets during the day and occasionally return to their homes or other locations at night. Street children risk a range of abuses when working on the streets and moving about without protection.

Police and communities often treat street children as a part of the larger crime problem, arbitrarily arresting, detaining and beating them, and forcing them to clean de-

**A 14-year-old boy in Mbale town, east of Kampala, was taken to the Kampiringisa National Rehabilitation Center outside Kampala. He was hit on the head with a baton when he resisted arrest, though later escaped.**

tention facilities. There is widespread belief within both the community at large and the police that street children are all criminals. Street children are often the first suspects when a crime, such as theft, is committed. Many street children expressed fear of the authorities and a total lack of protection on the streets. Police and officials from the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) threaten them at night, and beat them with batons, whips, or wires while demanding money or as a form of discipline for vagrancy. Children often hand over to the police and others whatever small sums they have to avoid further abuse or detention.





A 10-year-old boy looks for metal scraps at a garbage heap in Mbale town, east of Kampala. He sells metal scraps and empty plastic bottles in exchange for money, food, or petrol to sniff.



Key government institutions are failing to adequately protect these children. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, charged with child protection, and local government officials periodically order general roundups of street children throughout the country. These roundups usually occur ahead of special events, official visits, international conferences, or are a way for the ministry to be seen to be tackling the perceived “problem” of street children. At various times, police around the country have detained large groups of up to 100 children without charge in police stations with adults. According to knowledgeable sources, these roundups often occur at the behest of the ministry of gender and other officials. Many children are released back to the streets after several days, or in some cases weeks, often only after paying a bribe or being forced to work for the police while in custody, including cleaning.

Even when there are no pending criminal charges some children are transferred, without any clear justification, to one of the country’s four national remand homes or to the Kampiringisa National Rehabilitation Center, a juvenile detention center outside Kampala. Though civil society activists say instances of physical abuse in remand homes has decreased, the homes continue to suffer from inadequate staffing and resources. Children and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) report that both conditions and treatment at Kampiringisa continue to be deplorable.

In some instances in the locations where Human Rights Watch conducted research, community members harass, threaten, beat, and exploit street children. When a suspected or actual theft occurs, communities have converged on street children, occasionally carrying out mob violence; as a result, there are reports that some children have been killed. For example, in the northern town of Lira, local journalists documented three killings of street children by mobs between July and September 2013. Organizations working with street children acknowledge that police do not often investigate crimes committed against street children.

Older children or adults have viciously beaten and sexually abused children who are new to the streets as a form of initiation. These older children or street adults force younger or new street children to pay “rent” for staying with them or in a certain location on the streets. Older children and adults force some children into drug use, as well as occasionally coerce them to participate in theft or other crimes.

Children reported working as vendors, porters, domestic help, or laborers in homes, small restaurants, and other businesses, in order to get money for food. They were paid little for long hours and physically demanding work. Some children were victims of commercial sexual exploitation, using sex work to survive, and according to both Human Rights Watch research and the work of local organizations, both boys and girls faced rape and sexual assault by men and older street boys. Street children told Human Rights Watch that they rarely reported crimes committed by their peers or adults to the police, fearing reprisals from the others on the street, or punishment by the police.

**An 11-year old boy sniffs a combination of petrol and coffee spirits in Mbale town, east of Kampala. Children say that sniffing petrol helps them feel less hungry when they are unable to find scraps to sell or other work to buy food.**







**A 14-year-old boy washes his only pair of pants in the Nakivubo sewage channel in Kampala, his shirt tied around his waist.**

The Ugandan government has adopted strong domestic child protection legislation including the Children Act and laws prohibiting child labor. The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development has created multiple programs and policies intended to realize the rights of at-risk children like the National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children, which includes street children. And yet the government of Uganda has failed to meet its obligations to protect children on the streets from abuse at the hands of the police, local authorities, and others, because of the shortcomings in the government's implementation of its child protection framework.

The Uganda Human Rights Commission noted that the government's approach of "resettling and rehabilitating street children without addressing the factors that send children to the streets is an unsustainable solution in the long run." And argued that "there is an urgent need to address the causes and not just the symptoms."

Local NGOs are at the forefront of providing protection and services to street children throughout many small towns in Uganda. Some end up "facilitating" the costs for police and district officials to carry out their child protection duties, providing fuel, vehicles, and occasionally cash for services. District ordinances, in Lira and Kasese, have criminalized providing support to street children. These provisions, designed to protect children, should not be implemented in a way that curtails the work of local NGOs providing assistance such as food, education, and rehabilitation programs for street children given the multiple gaps in available government services.



A boy sleeps seated during the day outside of a closed business on a street in Mbale town, east of Kampala. Many children sleep during the day, and not at night, out of fear of being attacked at night by older street children or security personnel.

The government should ensure that street children are afforded the same rights and protections under domestic Ugandan law and regional and international provisions as all other Ugandan children. Human Rights Watch calls on the government of Uganda to meaningfully implement its child protection system and ensure that authorities in child protection at the district level have the means, support, and training to adequately perform their duties. The ministry of gender and local government officials should cease ordering roundups of children and arbitrary arrests. They should instead focus on ending the stigma associated with street children by providing education and positive campaigns on the rights of all

children throughout the country. Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) system should be used to ensure that the basic educational needs of all Ugandan children are met. The government should work to eliminate the extra costs of what is supposed to be free primary education under the UPE system and prevent future generations of children from ending up on the streets. NGOs seeking to support street children should be regulated but not face threat of criminal sanction for offering assistance.

Uganda has faced a number of corruption scandals and allegations of financial mismanagement in the last few years and some donors have cut or restructured their assistance in response. Donors considering how to provide development assistance in Uganda should support civil society organizations working in child protection and activities directly targeting street children throughout the country. Any funds should be carefully monitored to ensure they reach intended beneficiaries. Uganda's international partners should also actively voice their concerns regarding child protection and the treatment of street children at the hands of police and other authorities, and encourage the Ugandan government to uphold its international, regional, and domestic obligations to child rights.



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

## To the Government of Uganda

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### To the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development

- End the ministry's involvement in or promotion of roundups of street children in Kampala and elsewhere in Uganda.
- Empower the National Council for Children to act as a focal point to promote the protection of street children and monitor law enforcement practices related to street children.
- Ensure that sufficient budgets are allocated to ministry-led interventions that target street children specifically, working with nongovernmental organizations assisting street children to address gaps in programming.
- Take measures to fight stigma and discrimination against street children, for example through awareness-raising campaigns about the rights of all children, and creating a campaign and improving mechanisms to report child abuse to police. Such mechanisms should be available and accessible to both children and adults, like a free hotline and desks dedicated to receive reports in the offices of district-level probation and social welfare officers.
- Incorporate information on how to respect the rights of children into existing trainings of police officers, justice officials, health workers, district probation and social welfare officers, and others who interact with vulnerable children.
- Allocate sufficient funds to construct and maintain alternative facilities for children not in conflict with the law in each district as an alternative to remand homes and the national rehabilitation center.
- Carry out regular monitoring visits of the Kampiringisa National Rehabilitation Center and the four remand homes in Naguru (Kampala), Mbale, Gulu, and Fort Portal, to ensure the health and well-being of children in the centers.

### To the Ministry of Education and Sports

- Formulate and implement a national strategy to progressively reduce and eliminate costs related to education that often prevent children from going to or staying in school, such as the cost of meals, books, writing instruments, and uniforms.

### To the Ministry of Local Government

- Ensure that all probation and social welfare officers are trained in child rights.
- Allocate sufficient budgets to probation and social welfare officers to carry out their work on child protection, and implement programs for officers to conduct regular surveys of the number of children in their district to improve interventions and assistance.
- Allow, in the absence of government services, NGOs to operate assistance programs for street children and ensure that district ordinances do not impede the work of NGOs.

### To the Kampala Capital City Authority

- End the roundups of children and the practice of taking them to Kampiringisa or forcefully returning them to their homes.
- Ensure that all KCCA officers are trained in child rights and enforce the prohibition of abuse of children by KCCA officers.
- Initiate investigations into complaints concerning the abuse of street children, and disciplinary measures and criminal sanctions should occur where appropriate.

### To the Uganda Bureau of Statistics

- Include questions relating to children living, working, and sleeping on the streets in the next August 2014 census, in addition to existing questions relating to orphans.

### To the Uganda Police Force

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- End arbitrary arrests, detention, and roundups of street children.
- Investigate all allegations of beatings and violence of street children by police and consider bringing charges under Uganda's 2012 Anti-Torture Act.
- Enforce the prohibition against police brutality of street children.

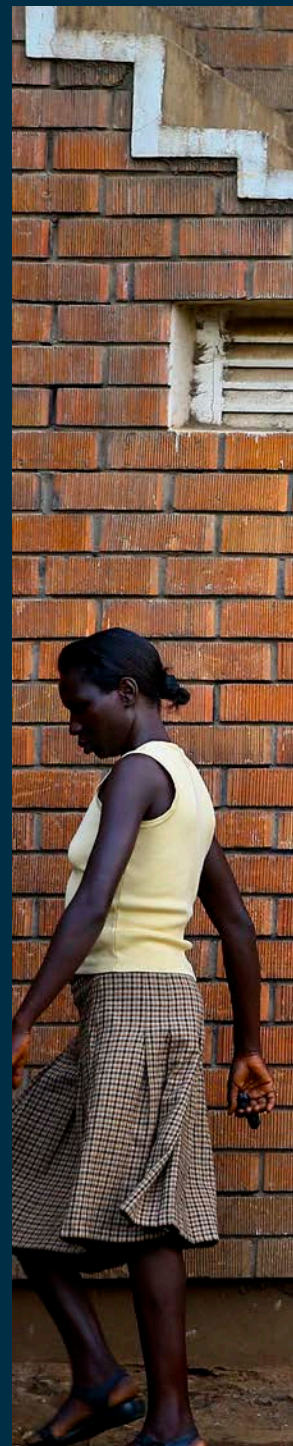


- Improve its investigative and forensic capacity to combat child abuse.
- Increase the number of Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU) officers to ensure that they are located in every police station.
- Provide adequate support, including resources for transportation and communication, to the CPFU to carry out its work on child protection.
- Improve safeguards for children in police custody.

## To Uganda's International Partners

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- Urge the government of Uganda to investigate abuses of street children committed by the Uganda Police Force (UPF) and KCCA.
- Condemn roundups of street children regularly when they occur and consistently raise concerns with Ugandan government officials, especially the inspector general of police, the minister of gender, labour and social development, and the executive director of the KCCA.
- If considering support to the government, provide technical and financial assistance specifically to improve the protection of children's rights.
- Promote the role and work of nongovernmental organizations in Uganda working with street children and help coordinate among NGOs and the government on child protection issues.







Street boys rest on the steps of a building in downtown Mbale town, east of Kampala. Many street children spend their time outside of stores and other businesses, in car parks, or inside music or video halls during the day when they are not searching for work or ways to find food.





Over half of all Ugandans are under the age of 15 and children are the single largest demographic group living in poverty.

Street children in Uganda's urban centers face the risk of violence, abuse, and discrimination at the hands of the police and the population at large. They lack basic necessities, including access to clean water, food, medical attention, shelter, and education.

Based on interviews with over 130 current and former street children, *"Where Do You Want Us to Go?"* documents human rights violations against street children by the police, local government officials, older street children and adults, and members of the community. Police and other officials, such as those from the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), have beaten, extorted money, and arbitrarily detained street children often in roundups.

Although Uganda has put in place a legal framework designed to protect child rights, including those of street children, key state child protection agencies are failing to respond adequately or effectively to the needs of these children. Human Rights Watch calls on the government of Uganda to end to the roundups and abuses against street children and implement its child protection system. Those responsible for abuse, including police and officials, should be investigated and prosecuted. International partners should consider supporting civil society organizations involved in child protection and activities directly targeting street children throughout the country.

*(above) A boy searches for metal scraps at a garbage heap in Mbale town, east of Kampala. Most of the street children in Mbale survive by picking and selling metal scraps.*

*(front cover) Street children in Mbale town in Uganda, 140 miles east of the capital, Kampala, surround an open fire to stay warm at night.*

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