

## **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND IDENTITY FORMATION OF 'STREET CHILDREN' IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT**

YARINA AHMAD<sup>1,2</sup>, SITI NUR FATHANAH ABD HAMID<sup>3,\*</sup>,  
NOR SUZIWANA TAHIR<sup>1</sup>, JASMINE AHMAD<sup>4</sup>, NUR AMALINA AZIZ<sup>5</sup>,  
SITI ZULAIKHA MUSTAPHA<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
Negeri Sembilan Campus Persiaran Seremban Tiga 1, Seremban 3, 70300 Seremban,  
Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Arts & Science, International University of Malaya Wales Jalan Tun Ismail,  
50480 Kuala Lumpur

<sup>5</sup>Faculty of Business & Management, Jalan Universiti Off, KM 12, Universiti Teknologi  
MARU, 85000 Segamat, Johor, Malaysia

<sup>6</sup>Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Bukit  
Ilmu, 18500 Machang, Kelantan, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author: fathanah@uitm.edu.my

### **Abstract**

Children's issues in particular related to "street children", is under-researched; therefore, thorough fundamental research is undertaken to provide constructive feedback in dealing effectively and holistically. An explanatory research design using a qualitative approach was used in this study. This study gathered data from 54 street children in five states in Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur; Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; Penang; Johor Bahru; and Sarawak); and 14 key persons representing relevant government agencies that deal with street children issue in Malaysia. The sociological research undertaken in this study discovered several significant findings. The main factor contributing to street children is poverty; followed by social problems, parents' attitude, working, parents who migrated from outside countries (external migration, school drop-outs, peer influence, unable to go to school, at-risk as street children, parents or self-migration (internal migration), family problems, bullying, runaway cases, undocumented, ex-prisoners, chronic diseases, and orphans. A new proposed definition of street children is developed based on the key findings. Finally, this study revealed a different social pattern of street children in the Malaysian context. This calls for more attention from various parties particularly government agencies which deal with street children in the country.

Keywords: Definition, Identity formation, Social construction, Street children.

## **1. Introduction**

The issue of street children in Malaysia is not new; rather it began receiving government and relevant parties' attention in the 21st century. In most situations, street children received negative connotations and were portrayed as problematic and a burden to the country [1, 2]. The definition of street children is often misused by many parties such as between children "on" and "off" the street [1]; and varies across countries based on their cultural and ethical practices [1-3]. While defining and understanding the discourse on street children has undergone its transformation [1]; it is argued that this transformation also occurred in Malaysia, yet less emphasis is given to sociological research.

The study on social construction and identity formation of street children in a Malaysian context is vital that provides an in-depth understanding of this group of children that still require support and protection by many parties. Singh claimed that street children issue has been a long-standing social problem in Malaysia; the author also claimed that the Malaysian government does not deal with this issue effectively [4]. While various factors lead to the ineffectiveness of government programs and policies to deal with street children, one of the factors could be the lack of in-depth understanding of this issue. Consequently, the lack of emphasis on the social construction of street children in the Malaysian context underpinned the effectiveness of government policy and programs. Thus, the findings of this study are important in providing relevant information in addressing the street children issue effectively and holistically.

## **2. Malaysian Population, Street Children**

### **2.1. Literature review**

A growing concern on the issue of street children globally has been raised by many scholars [5, 6]. Street children are among the "invisible", "marginalized", "vulnerable" and "forgotten" children, who loiter, work, live and stay on the streets [7-9]. Although street children are among the most "physically visible" among all children; at the same time, they are the most "invisible" and hardest to reach [9].

The discourse surrounding the issue of street children mostly emphasized the factors contributing to this issue, identifying and reaching the street children, creating awareness of the painful life and situations faced by street children, and proposing strategies to protect and rescue street children and children at risk [9].

In understanding the issue of street children globally, The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has provided a universal definition of street children which is:

"Street children can be defined as any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street has become his or her habitual abode or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by the responsible adults."

Although there exists a universal definition of street children by UNICEF; it is argued that this definition has several limitations and is only applicable to represent street children generally [6]. The global recognition of the "street children problem" began by relying on the Latin American models; however, Ennew and Swart-Kruger [1] argued that definitions of street children are often misused. For

example, UNICEF distinguished street children between “on” and “of” the street, where it has been altered based on new information. Thus, the definition of street children remains subjective depending on different social construction and identity formation of different countries and cultures.

Scholars around the world have developed distinctive definitions to portray the characteristics, nature, and behaviour of street children based on different situations, contexts, environments, and cultural practices. For instance, the street children phenomenon in India can be considered as a serious issue where they are associated with children who are roofless and rootless [9]. Silva [10] defined street children in Asia as: “children aged 5 to 18 years old who have chosen to spend most of their time on the streets for various reasons and on various occupation”.

In Malaysia, research undertaken by Ahmad et al. [11] has categorized street children into two categories, which are, (1) street children whom the street has become their home (they live, sleep and stay on the street), and (2) street children who were on the street during the day and go back to their homes at midnight. However, Bajunid et al. [3] in their empirical research have developed a definition of street children which covers their age and behaviour: “children in a range from infants to 18 years of age, facing various critical social problems. They were exposed to negative social upbringing either accidentally or have been forced into these predicaments” [3].

The definitions developed by different scholars show a various understanding of street children based on different characteristics, nature, and behaviour of street children in different countries, contexts, and cultures.

Debates and discussions on the street children issue revealed street children are associated with various simple and negative definitions based on different cultures. For example, in Kenya, street children are associated as “*chokorra*” (odd-job boy) [12]; in India, street children are called “*sadak chap*” (rootless children) [9]; in Vietnam, street children are labelled as “*bui doi*” (dust of life) [8]; in Ghana, Africa, street children are associated as “*kubolo*” which has a negative connotation [12]; and many others. In Malaysia, street children are labelled in different names such as, “*anak jalanan*”, “*budak kaki lima*”, “street sleepers”, and also associated as “homeless children”.

A review of the literature indicated that street children is not a new issue in the world; it has become one of the academic subjects of discussion and welfare concern for over two decades [1]. The issue of street children has undergone its transformation from various disciplines and focus, as well as differences in culture, values, and norms practised by different countries [1-3, 10]. Street children issue had become a subject of discussion in most Asian countries in the 1980s [10].

Approximately 25 to 30 million street children were recorded in developing countries since the 1980s to early 1990s: an estimation of 50,000 street children in Metro Manila alone; Thailand reports around 10,000 street children; the estimate for Jakarta, Indonesia was 4,422; Vietnam estimates around 50,000 homeless children; and China reports seven million truants in 1988 [10].

Although there were no reliable figures of street children available for Malaysia until the 1990s, the Department of Social Welfare has recorded two categories of children some of whom can be found on the street, with data for 1986 to 1990 that mention as (1) child beggars (415 persons) and foreign child beggars (415 persons);

and (2) abandoned children (2,080 persons) (pp. 69-70) [10]. Thus, street children in Malaysia are not a new issue; rather it only began to gain the government's serious attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the rising number of street children and the social problems associated with these children.

Data recorded by the Department of Social Welfare from 2003 to 2008 showed a rising number of street children in Malaysia. In Kuala Lumpur city centre, for instance, a total number of 777 street children were recorded in 2003 and increased to 1,099 street children in 2008 [3]. From the total number of street children recorded by the Department of Social Welfare; male children were approximately ten times higher than females who became street children. An interesting discovery by Al Jazeera in 2007 discovered a huge number of street children, approximately around 500 children were found loitering at night in the back streets of Kuala Lumpur city centre [4].

Further, in Sabah it is reported that almost 15,000 street children were found in Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan; however, when during save and rescue operations, not more than six street children were identified [11]. Notably, the majority of street children in Sabah were undocumented due to their status as illegal immigrants [7]. This proved that this issue is a serious matter. Subsequently, Singh claimed that the street children issue is a long-standing social problem in Malaysia, and it is argued that the Malaysian government does not deal with this issue seriously [4].

The literature review revealed that many factors contribute to the street children issue. This study further argued that the factors contributing to street children are among the variables that construct the meaning of street children; such as poverty, broken family, throwaway or runaways, loss of support from an adult family due to illness, death or abandonment, an episode of domestic violence or victims of child abuse, cultural expectations such as boys should work on the streets as soon as he can help the family and many others [1].

A study undertaken by Abd Hamid et al. [13] on the survival strategies of street children in Kuala Lumpur city and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, proved that poverty is the major factor that leads these vulnerable children to be living on the street. Due to this situation, working on the street has become the priority among street children rather than going to school for education; this is especially seen in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah [13].

Further, among the important variables for identity formation of street children include the street as the place for identity formation, discrimination, and stigmatization [14], distinguishing between "home" and "street", paradigm shift from considering individual children as the site of the problems – either as victims or as delinquents, spaces, places and power, time and transformation, dirt and danger [14].

While social construction and identity formation of street children is argued to be different across countries with different cultures; thus, there is a high necessity to conduct this research to explore different patterns of social construction and identity formation of street children in the Malaysian context. Further, this area of study is under-researched; and lack of emphasis on the social construction of street children in the Malaysian context is argued to be one of the factors that underpinned the effectiveness of the government's programs and policies in dealing with street children issue.

### 3. Methodology

This study applied an explanatory research design using a qualitative approach to investigate deeper into the issue of street children in Malaysia. According to Creswell, qualitative research is an approach that is usually being adopted to studies that aim to explore and understand the individuals or groups' behaviour related to any social or human problem. The explanatory design is a common design for fundamental research, and the qualitative approach is well suited for sociological research which is considered the most appropriate approach to conduct a study to socially construct the identity of street children in Malaysia. Two qualitative approaches are applied in this study, which are, in-depth interviews and observations (non-participant observation based on several criteria to understand the street children's identity and challenges faced) [15].

Semi-structured interview protocols were developed to gather primary data for this study which involved two groups of informants: (i) street children, and (ii) key persons representing relevant agencies dealing with street children's issues in Malaysia. The interview questions were constructed in dual language (English and the Malay language) based on secondary data information derived from government documents, reports, literature, previous relevant research, and others. During data collection, a casual Malay language was used to communicate with street children. On some occasions, a local representative helped to explain the questions using their local languages (e.g., among Bajau Laut, Sulu, Indonesian, and Filipinos) to the non-citizen or stateless informants, particularly in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; and further, translate the feedback from the informants to the researchers.

The scope of this study covered five states which were identified as the areas that are mostly resided by street children or children at risk to be street children in Malaysia. The states or areas selected for this study includes (i) Kuala Lumpur city; (ii) Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; (iii) Penang (city area); (iv) Johor Bahru (city area); and (v) Kuching, Sarawak (city area). The data collection for this study is categorized into three phases as described in the following sub-sections.

#### 3.1. Phase one: in-depth interviews with street children followed by observations

- Observations and in-depth interviews with the street children to obtain an insight into their identity and issues faced by the street children themselves (Kuala Lumpur, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Penang, and Johor Bahru).
- Observations and in-depth interviews with "children at risks to be street children" in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching, Sarawak (observation only).

#### 3.2. Phase two: in-depth interviews with key persons representing relevant government agencies

- In-depth interviews with key persons representing relevant government agencies that deal with street children's issues in Malaysia are,
  - i. Two key persons from Children Division, Department of Social Welfare, Putrajaya.
  - ii. One key person from Children Division, Department of Social Welfare, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.
  - iii. Two key persons from Rumah Kanak-Kanak, Papar, Sabah.

- iv. Six key persons from *Rumah Perlindungan Ehsan*, at Temporary Detention Centre, Papar, Sabah.
- v. One key person from Temporary Detention Centre, Papar, Sabah.
- vi. One key person from Kuala Lumpur City Hall (who deals with homeless children in Kuala Lumpur city).
- vii. One key person from Kota Kinabalu City Hall (who deals with street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah).

### **3.3. Phase three: validation of the research findings with experts and professionals**

- The findings of this study were validated with experts and professionals during the seminar: “National Seminar Series UiTM-CMI 2016: Addressing homelessness and street children’s issues in Malaysia: Perspectives for policy development” which was held on 23rd May 2016, at INTEKMA Resort and Convention Centre, Shah Alam Selangor. The experts and professionals who participated in the discussion include:
  - i. One international expert in the area of Sociology,
  - ii. One national expert in the area of Sociology and Anthropology,
  - iii. One key person from DBKL (Head, Traffic and Special Task Division, DBKL),
  - iv. Two key persons from the Department of Social Welfare (Chief Assistant Director and Senior Assistant Director, DSW); and
  - v. One key person from NGO (Chairman).

The entire process of qualitative research involved in this study was thoroughly applied based on Creswell, which considers emerging questions during the data collection, and procedures applied in gathering the primary data, data collection were undertaken based on the informants’ setting. Data analysis was conducted based on inductive approach using thematic analysis for further discussion to develop the definition of street children in the Malaysian context [6].

## **4. Results**

The result of this study begins with the discussion on 54 informants (street children) who were involved in this study, and 14 key persons representing relevant government agencies that deal with street children’s issues in Malaysia. The findings of this study are based on three aspects, namely, factors contributing to the street children issue; identity formation and social pattern of street children in Malaysia; and the construction of the definition of street children in the Malaysian context.

### **4.1. Profile of informants among street children in Malaysia**

This study has gathered 54 responses from street children in five states in Malaysia. From the 54 informants, 23 of them resided at Kota Kinabalu city area (Filipino market and the surrounding areas); 19 informants resided at Kuala Lumpur city (Chow Kit Road, Bukit Bintang and surrounding areas); nine of them were from Penang city (Padang Kota, Gurney Drive, Penang city centre and surrounding areas); three informants were from Johor Bahru city. Meanwhile, there were no genuine street children found in the area surroundings Kuching city centre, Sarawak state. Hence, only observation was undertaken to observe the behaviour

of children and adolescents (aged 18 years and below) who loiter around and loafing among their friends.

While this study aims to explore the issue of street children in Malaysia which covers popular areas resided by these children, the number of informants involved in this study was limited to their availability and willingness to participate in this study. Notably, this study managed to gather many street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah due to the high volume of stateless including children that were seen surrounding the Filipino market. The migrants who were mostly undocumented and stateless have formed a community and lived at a floating slum on the nearby island called, Gaya Island, across the straits from Kota Kinabalu. Meanwhile, street children who resided in other states (Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru) were mostly locals; only five of them were non-citizens (Indonesian and Myanmar) and were residing at Kuala Lumpur city centre.

Nearly three-quarter of the informants were male (37 children), and the remaining were female informants. Female street children were hardly seen particularly in Penang and Johor Bahru. On the other hand, female street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah were among stateless children who loitered around the city, day and night. Notably, female street children in Kuala Lumpur, particularly among locals were mostly seen at night, when they were sleeping on the street with other homeless people.

The street children came from different levels of ages. However, street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah were seen as young as 6 years old. These children, although were very young, were found loitering around the city alone and with their friends, without adult supervision. They somehow feel safe playing and loitering on the street without worrying about strangers, criminals, and others. Meanwhile, street children in other states were mostly adolescents and teenagers. Two informants were unsure about their actual age, due to having no documents and stateless status.

In terms of citizenship, 28 informants who were involved in this study were mostly non-citizens and stateless (Indonesian, Filipino, and Vietnamese [Rohingya's ethnic group]). Further, among 22 local street children, 21 of them were Malays and only one informant was from the Indian ethnic group. However, the informants who were involved in this group were only limited to the street children who were visible around the city, and willing to participate in this research. There are probably street children from other ethnic groups, however, due to their invisibility, there were not approached to participate in this research. The overall background of informants involved in this study is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Profile of informants among street children in Malaysia.**

	Criteria/Characteristics	Number of respondent/s	Percentage (%)
<b>Location</b>	Kuala Lumpur city	19	35.2
	Kota Kinabalu, Sabah	23	42.6
	Penang (city centre)	9	16.7
	Johor Bahru (city centre)	3	5.5
	Kuching Sarawak (city centre)	Observations only, due to less visible of genuine street children	
	Male	37	68.5

<b>Gender</b>	Female	17	31.5
<b>Age groups</b>	6 – 7 years	8	14.8
	8 – 10 years	11	20.4
	11 – 14 years	19	35.2
	15 – below 18 years	14	25.9
	Unknown (unsure or don't know about their actual age due to undocumented problem)	2	3.7
<b>Ethnicity/ Citizenship</b>	Malay	22	40.7
	India	1	1.9
	Chinese	0	0.0
	Non-citizen	28	51.9
	Unknown (unsure or don't know about their ethnicity and citizenship due to undocumented problem)	3	5.6

#### 4.2. Profile of informants among key persons representing relevant agencies in Malaysia

This study managed to collect 14 feedbacks from key informants representing relevant agencies who deal with street children in Malaysia, as presented in Table 2. As indicated earlier, street children in Malaysia mostly reside in the city of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Hence, feedback from the agencies includes both areas. Further, feedback from the policymakers is from the Department of Social Welfare headquarters, located at Putrajaya. To further understand the issue of street children in Sabah, in-depth interviews with the key person who oversees Rumah Kanak-Kanak, Rumah Perlindungan Ehsan, and the Temporary Detention Centre in Papar, Sabah were conducted. Further, in-depth inquiries to investigate deeper into stateless in Sabah were conducted among the policy implementers and the social welfare officers who worked at Rumah Perlindungan Ehsan in Papar, Sabah.

**Table 2. Profile of informants involving key persons representing relevant agencies in Malaysia.**

<b>Agencies dealing with street children's issues in Malaysia</b>	<b>Number of respondent/s</b>
Children Division, DSW Putrajaya	2
Children Division, DSW Kota Kinabalu, Sabah	1
<i>Rumah Kanak-Kanak</i> , Papar Sabah	2
<i>Rumah Perlindungan Ehsan</i> , Temporary Retention Centre, Papar Sabah	6
Temporary Retention Centre, Papar Sabah	1
Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL)	1
Kota Kinabalu City Hall (DBKK)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>

#### 4.3. Findings

The findings of this study are based on three stages of research exploration, which are elucidating the factors contributing to the street children issue in Malaysia,



exploring the identity formation and social pattern of street children in Malaysia, and constructing the definition of street children in the Malaysian context.

#### 4.3.1. Factors contributing to street children in Malaysia

The findings of this study revealed several factors contributing to street children issue in Malaysia. Notably, there is no single factor that leads children to end their lives on the street. The issue of street children in Malaysia involved multi-factors depending on the situation, context, environment, and cultural practices. The top five main factors discovered from this study were poverty (39 respondents), followed by social problem (28 respondents), parents' attitudes (28 respondents), working children (26 respondents), and parents' migration (external migration) (22 respondents).

In terms of "poverty", many street children claimed that they faced financial constraints due to pressure of living in the urban areas (urban poor); some of them came from very poor families (hardcore poor) with poor educational backgrounds (they come from uneducated families); many street children were among the illegal immigrants where they came to Malaysia illegally with their parents/guardians/family members. Majority of street children are involved with "social problems" such as drug addiction, glue-sniffing, consuming alcohol, smoking, loitering, being involved in illegal racing, gangsterism, and being involved in Punk groups.

Among the "parents' attitude" that lead to street children issues include parents' ignorance, whereby thirteen parents sent/asked their children to work, begging together with their children, parent's employment, and child selling (especially among poor families). "Working" was found as one of the main factors contributing to street children issue—this is due to financial constraints faced by their families, and the children need to work to self-support themselves (to buy food), to support their families as well as involved in begging activities. Many street children in Malaysia particularly in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah were among illegal immigrants—"parents' external migration" where they came to Malaysia with their parents/guardians/family members, and some were born in Malaysia. These children faced challenges in terms of documentation and thus, hinder them from attending school.

Other than the five main factors, other factors contribute to street children issue in Malaysia which include school drop-outs, peer influence, unable to go to school, at risk to be street children, parents or self-migration (internal migration), family problems, bullying, runaway cases, undocumented, ex-prisoners, chronic diseases and having no parents (parents have passed away).

#### 4.3.2. Identity formation and social pattern of street children in Malaysia

This study revealed identity formation and social patterns of street children in different areas based on different situations, contexts, environments, and cultural practices.

*Street children in Kuala Lumpur city*—Majority of street children who reside in the city of Kuala Lumpur were among those who migrated from other states such as from Perak, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, and others. Male street children aged 10 years and above (below 18 years) were among street children who stay, live, and sleep on the street. Teenage female street children were found loitering around the

city to get support (food, clothes, and others) and mingle with their friends—they were mostly urban poor and have low education. Street children aged below 10 years were mostly found loitering and playing on the street with the presence of their parents/father/mother/guardian/siblings. Some of them were homeless children, as their parents/father/mother/guardian were also homeless. All street children in the Kuala Lumpur city were found not working but had experience working before—this is due to strong support from the NGOs in terms of providing food, clothes, and informal education.

**Street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah**—Majority of street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah were among illegal immigrants, undocumented, have low or no education, came from very poor families (hardcore poor), and a high majority of them were working and some of them were involved in parents' employment (helping their parents/mother/father/siblings). The male street children were mostly visible compared to female street children. Notably, female street children were mostly monitored by their parents/mother/father/guardian while on the street. The findings of this study revealed that street children in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah need to survive more than street children in Kuala Lumpur city. This is because there is very little support from non-governmental organizations for free food and clothes in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

**Street children in Penang**—Street children in Penang were among the homeless children who were neglected and abandoned by their families. They were among the illegal immigrants and also local people who were unfortunate (suffering from diseases, mental problems), urban poor, hardcore poor, and have low or no education.

**Street children in Johor Bahru**—Street children in Johor Bahru were less visible due to feelings of insecurity of being caught by the local authorities. They were mostly poor, uneducated, working to survive and to support their daily lives.

**Children at risk to be street children in Kuching, Sarawak**—During the observation, there were no genuine street children found in the area of Kuching city centre. However, this research argues that there are street children in Kuching, Sarawak; but they were not easily seen around and difficult to be reached. Many children were found loitering around the city and some were found drunk and sleeping at the park. These children were among children at risk to be street children in Kuching, Sarawak.

### **4.3.3. The social construction and identity formation of street children: The development of street children's definition in the Malaysian context**

A critical analysis of the existing definition of street children (nationally and internationally) and a new proposed definition of street children (based on the findings of this study) is presented in Table 3.

Based on the critical analysis presented in Table 3, the proposed definition of street children in a Malaysia context is: "A street child refers to any girl or boy aged below 18 years old, regardless of their citizenship, who have not received adequate care, protection, supervision and direction from responsible adults, whose rights as a child have been neglected, and either the street has become their home (on the street and off the street) and a source of livelihood (working or begging) for his/her survival."

**Table 3. Mapping the definition of street children to form a new definition of street children in the Malaysian context.**

Definition (Source)	Characteristics			
	Gender	Age	Categories	Care and protection
UNICEF (2001) [6] (Universal definition)	Street children can be defined as any girl or boy, and who is [...]	[...] who has not reached adulthood [...]	[...] for whom the street has become his or her habitual abode or sources of livelihood [...]	[...] inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults.
Inter-NGO Program on Street Children and Street Youth (1983) [16] (India)	-	-	Street children are those for whom the street is more than their family and has become their real home [...]	[...] a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from the responsible adults.
Patel (1990) [17] (India)	-	-	[...] without a roof and without roots.	-
Silva (1993) [10] (Asia)	-	Children aged 5 to 18 years old [...]	[...] who have chosen to spend most of their time on the streets for various reasons and on various "occupations".	-
Ahmad, Latif & Sulaiman (2011) [11] (Malaysia)	-	-	Two categories: (1) Street children for whom the street has become their home (they live, sleep and stay on the street); and (2) Street children who were on the street during the day and go back to their home at midnight.	-
Ibrahim Bajunid, Aliaas & Abdullah (2012) [18] (Malaysia)	-	Children in a range from infants to 18 years of age [...]	[...] facing various critical social problems.	They were exposed to negative social upbringing either accidentally or have been forced into these predicaments.
Findings from this study	Any girl or boy	Aged below 18 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Malaysian and non-Malaysian (regardless of their citizenship)</li> <li>▪ Either the street has become their home or source of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Received inadequate care, protection, supervision and direction from responsible adults (parents/guardians/</li> </ul>

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livelihood [(i) on the street—genuine street children, no accommodation or shelter, stay, live and sleep on the street; (ii) on the street occasionally—live and sleep on the street occasionally, high risk to be genuine street children, have temporary shelter/accommodation; (iii) off the street—working/loitering during the day and go to their home in the midnight, live with parents/mother/father/adults/guardians)	caregivers). ■ Their rights as children have been neglected (rights for education, healthcare and basic services) by relevant parties (parents, society, government and others)
■ Homeless children (their parents are among homeless people)	
■ Engaged in social problems (either willingly or have been forced/involved in syndicates)	
■ Low and no education (school drop-outs, uneducated families/parents)	
■ Urban poor and hardcore poor	

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## 5. Discussion

This study revealed several factors contributing to the street children issue in Malaysia. Notably, there is no single factor; rather the street children issue in Malaysia is the result of multi-factors depending on the situation, context, environment and cultural practices. The main factor that contributes to street children is poverty; and this finding is supported by many kinds of literature [11, 19, 20]. Many street children in Malaysia were found involved in social problems such as drug addiction, glue sniffing and gangsterism [3]; this is consistent with the findings of research undertaken by Ahmad et al. [11].

As most of the street children in Malaysia are poor, they need to work to support themselves and their families. Working street children is not new, many street children around the world need to work due to being poor and having no support [6, 19-21]. Further, many children who illegally came to Malaysia with their parents/ mother/father/guardians/siblings ended as homeless or street children. Due

to this situation, many street children were found undocumented and thus, their basic rights were neglected [7, 21]. Other factors contributing to street children issue in Malaysia found from this study include school drop-outs, peer influence, unable to go to school, at risks to be street children, parents or self-migration, family problems, bullying, runaway cases, undocumented, ex-prisoners, chronic diseases and having no parents.

The overall findings of this study revealed a different social pattern of street children in the Malaysian context that calls for more attention from various parties particularly the government agencies which deal with street children in the country. These findings showed the need for the government to design specific policies and programs to address the street children issue effectively. The development of the programs and initiatives should take into consideration the identity of street children in different areas—programs and initiatives should be tailored to the right target groups.

The findings of this study also revealed that the definition of street children is different according to situations, context, environment and cultural practices. Hence, the new proposed definition of street children developed based on the key findings of this study is: “A street child refers to any girl or boy aged below 18 years old, regardless of their citizenship, who have not received adequate care, protection, supervision and direction from responsible adults, whose rights as a child have been neglected, and either the street has become their home (on the street and off the street) and a source of livelihood (working or begging) for his/her survival.”

## 6. Conclusions

Issues on street children are recognized as a serious issue around the world which have a significant impact on the children themselves, society, the nation, and the whole world. Although the number of street children in Malaysia keeps increasing, it is only recently that the government began to give attention to the issue. At present, street children are not covered specifically in any of Malaysian acts and policies. This is the main gap that needs to be addressed promptly by the government. Further, there is no specific definition of street children in a Malaysian context. Malaysia like other countries relies on the universal definition of street children proposed by UNICEF. It is argued that the definition proposed by UNICEF is general and limited to be applied in Malaysia. Hence, thorough research was conducted to socially construct the definition of street children in Malaysia. A specific definition is crucial to further understand the issue, formulate policies and regulations, and design programs and initiatives [6].

This study has identified the factors contributing to the street children issue in Malaysia. Notably, there is no single factor causing a child to be a street child. Rather there exist multi-factors that are interrelated that lead to the street children issue. Feedback from street children themselves about the situations they faced, supported by the feedback from relevant government agencies was used to construct a new definition of street children in a Malaysian context. With a specific and holistic definition of street children developed based on key findings of this study; it is believed that the street children issue can be addressed effectively. In developing a new policy, programs and initiatives to deal with the street children issue, this new definition and the information on street children identity and contributing factors can be utilized. Finally, cooperation from all parties including

the public, government, non-governmental organizations, and corporate sectors are needed to tackle this issue holistically. This is because street children are also our children who will be among the future generation to lead the country. To ensure this, their rights for development, care, protection and survival should not be neglected - street children issue needs to be addressed effectively and holistically.

This study proposed several recommendations to further address the street children issue effectively:

- The government policies should be improved and strengthened to cover “street children” as one of the issues to be tackled by the government. This is to ensure that the country complies with the Child Rights Convention (CRC) that focuses on the welfare and lives of children that lead to aspects of survival, protection, development and participation.
- The new definition of street children in a Malaysian context should be used as guidance to identify street children in Malaysia and design specific programs and initiatives to deal with this issue effectively.
- The social pattern and identity of street children discovered from this study can be used to inform the government to develop programs and initiatives tailored to the right target groups.
- The main root cause of the street children issue and other social issues is “poverty”. The government needs to pay serious attention to eradicating poverty and reduce inequality holistically. Otherwise, street children may not be considered as a problem; rather it should be seen as the consequences of the real problem (poverty).
- As many street children are among the illegal immigrants; the government should address the border security issue effectively. Children of illegal immigrants who ended being homeless and street children are the victims of situations. They do not have other options and cannot decide for themselves. Once they became homeless and street children in our country, it is our responsibility to save and protect them. This is because child rights never differentiate children.
- Create awareness among all parties including the public, government and non-government agencies and corporate sectors to save and protect street children in Malaysia. In dealing with a complex social issue such as street children, all parties need to play their roles and address this issue holistically.
- Continuously conduct research and publication to promote and educate all parties to assist the nation in addressing the street children issue.
- Establish educational platforms that integrate technology that offer activities and programmes which can lessen the number of street children and attract them to learn. This situation subsequently improves their literacy, e-literacy and provide useful skills to reduce their marginality and improve a future reinsertion in the society.

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