

Street Children and Urban Social Policy: A Case Study of Kampala Central Division

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of urban social policy interventions on the welfare and reintegration outcomes of street children in Kampala Central Division, Uganda's most densely populated and commercially active administrative division. Drawing on a mixed-methods cross-sectional study involving 214 respondents comprising current street children aged 8–17, recently reintegrated former street children, social workers, KCCA officers, and NGO programme staff -the study assessed how child protection policy implementation, rehabilitation programme quality, and family reintegration support services influenced street children's welfare outcomes including school enrolment, health access, and sustainable reintegration success. Descriptive statistics revealed significant policy implementation gaps across all dimensions (means 2.87–3.24). Pearson correlation confirmed significant positive relationships between all three policy dimensions and child welfare outcomes ($r = 0.561\text{--}0.691$, $p < .001$). Multiple regression demonstrated that the three dimensions explained 58.4% of variance in child welfare outcomes ($R^2 = 0.584$, $F = 27.83$, $p < .001$). SEM analysis confirmed child protection policy implementation as the strongest total effect predictor (total $\beta = 0.463$), with rehabilitation programme quality partially mediating policy implementation effects. The study called for a comprehensive Street Children Elimination Strategy for Kampala, integrated multi-agency coordination, and sustained funding for prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration programming.

Keywords: Street Children, Urban Social Policy, Child Protection, Rehabilitation, Reintegration, KCCA,

Kampala, Child Welfare, Uganda, SEM

1.0 Background of the Study

Street children broadly defined as children who spend significant time on the street, whether fully homeless or maintaining some family connection while spending most daylight hours in public spaces represent one of the most visible manifestations of urban poverty, family breakdown, and social policy failure in Sub-Saharan African cities. In Kampala, Uganda's primate city and the locus of the country's most acute urban poverty challenges, the street children population had been estimated at between 6,000 and 10,000 individuals at any given time, with Kampala Central Division-encompassing the CBD, Owino Market, the Old Taxi Park, and the Nakivubo channel settlements-hosting the highest concentration due to the economic opportunities and social anonymity that the commercial core provided (Kampala Capital City Authority, 2022). These children occupied a paradoxical position in the urban policy landscape: highly visible in the city's public spaces, yet largely invisible in formal social protection systems, with multiple government agencies, NGOs, and faith-based organisations claiming responsibility for their welfare without any single institution possessing clear mandate, adequate resources, or comprehensive reach.

Uganda's Children Act (2016), the National Child Policy (2020), and KCCA's Social Development Strategy (2021–2025) all contained provisions addressing street children's rights to protection, education, health, and family care (Julius & Audrey, 2026b). Yet the translation of these policy commitments into coordinated, adequately resourced, and effectively implemented street children services in Kampala Central Division had been chronically insufficient, resulting in a persistent gap between policy aspiration and children's actual welfare experiences (Julius & Kaazara, 2025). Understanding which specific policy implementation dimensions most significantly influenced street children's welfare outcomes was essential for designing more effective urban social policy responses (T. Christopher & Nelson, 2024).

2.0 Problem Statement

Despite the existence of multiple legal and policy frameworks mandating street children's protection and the active presence of over 20 NGOs and government agencies claiming street children service mandates in Kampala Central Division, the street child population had grown rather than declined between 2015 and 2023, school enrolment among street children remained below 30%, and successful reintegration rates measured as sustained family reunion or stable alternative care placement after 12 months were estimated at only 34% by NGO coalition data (Julius & Betty, 2026). This persistence of crisis despite policy provision and programmatic activity suggested fundamental implementation failures that this study sought to diagnose.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective was to examine the influence of urban social policy on street children's welfare outcomes in Kampala Central Division. Specific objectives were: (i) to assess the influence of child protection policy implementation on street children's welfare; (ii) to evaluate rehabilitation programme quality's effect on welfare outcomes; and (iii) to determine the relationship between family reintegration support services and sustainable reintegration outcomes.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provided the theoretical architecture, conceptualising street children's vulnerability and welfare as the product of interactions across multiple system levels: the microsystem (immediate family and peer relationships), mesosystem (school and community connections), exosystem (parents' employment and social support systems), macrosystem (national policy, cultural norms, poverty), and chronosystem (developmental trajectories over time). This framework predicted that effective social policy intervention required engagement across multiple system levels simultaneously — addressing individual child needs while also engaging family systems, rebuilding community connections, and reforming the macrosystem conditions of poverty and family fragmentation that drove street child formation. The Social Exclusion Framework (Levitas, 2006) complemented ecological theory by analysing street children's situation as a product of multidimensional exclusion from economic,

social, political, and cultural participation — an exclusion that required multidimensional policy responses addressing each dimension of exclusion rather than narrowly focused rescue-and-rehabilitation approaches.

4.2 Empirical Literature

Research on street children and social policy in East African cities documented both the scale of the challenge and the conditions for effective intervention. Lugalambi (2020) found in a comparative study of Kampala and Nairobi that the primary determinants of successful street child reintegration were family economic stability (poverty reduction), counselling and trauma support quality, and school re-enrolment support-with interventions addressing all three dimensions achieving 61% 12-month reintegration success compared to 28% for single-domain interventions. Mutonyi (2021) documented in a study of KCCA street child programmes that coordination failure among multiple implementing agencies was the most significant structural barrier to service effectiveness, with children frequently falling through gaps between agencies with overlapping but poorly coordinated mandates.

5.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional mixed-methods design was employed(Jallow et al., 2022). The study population comprised all identifiable stakeholders in street children programming in Kampala Central Division(Nafiu, 2012). A sample of 214 respondents across five strata was obtained: current street children aged 12–17 (48, with parental/guardian consent or statutory authority where appropriate), recently reintegrated former street children (54), social workers (42), KCCA officers (34), and NGO programme staff (36). Ethnographic observation supplemented survey and interview data. Cronbach's Alpha: 0.83 (child protection policy), 0.81 (rehabilitation quality), 0.79 (reintegration support), 0.85 (child welfare outcomes). SPSS 26 and AMOS 24 were used(Nelson et al., 2022).

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics-Policy Dimensions and Child Welfare Outcomes (N = 214)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Child Protection Policy Implementation	214	1.00	5.00	3.24	0.96
Rehabilitation Programme Quality	214	1.00	5.00	3.11	1.02
Family Reintegration Support Services	214	1.00	5.00	2.87	1.08
Child Welfare Outcomes	214	1.00	5.00	3.08	0.94

Source: Field Data, 2025

The descriptive results reveal a consistent pattern of below-midpoint-to-moderate effectiveness ratings across all policy dimensions-the lowest mean scores of any study in this compendium reflecting the severe implementation deficits characterizing Kampala's street children policy landscape. Child protection policy implementation received a mean of only 3.24 (SD = 0.96), reflecting that while legal frameworks existed, their enforcement and operationalisation in practical child protection services was inconsistent, underfunded, and fragmented across multiple agencies without clear implementation leadership. Rehabilitation programme quality received a mean of 3.11 (SD =

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1.02), with the high standard deviation indicating dramatic quality disparities across different rehabilitation centres and NGO programmes from well-resourced, professionally staffed drop-in centres with comprehensive psychosocial and educational services to minimally equipped facilities providing little more than temporary shelter (Joshua et al., 2026). Family reintegration support received the lowest mean (2.87, SD = 1.08), confirming that the support provided to families to enable sustainable reintegration including economic support, counselling, and monitoring was the most severely under-resourced dimension of the policy response, consistent with the documented 34% 12-month reintegration success rate that reflected the absence of adequate post-placement family support (Margaret & Kazaara, 2024).

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix-Policy Dimensions and Child Welfare Outcomes (N = 214)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Child Protection Policy Impl.	1.000			
2. Rehabilitation Programme Quality	0.548**	1.000		
3. Family Reintegration Support	0.512**	0.531**	1.000	
4. Child Welfare Outcomes	0.691**	0.634**	0.561**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Field Data, 2025

All three policy dimensions demonstrated significant positive correlations with child welfare outcomes. Child protection policy implementation showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.691$, $p < .01$), affirming that the quality and consistency of legal protection enforcement including police child protection unit responsiveness, probation officer case management, and inter-agency coordination was the most powerful institutional determinant of street children's welfare outcomes (Julius & Betty, 2026). Rehabilitation programme quality demonstrated a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.634$, $p < .01$), confirming the critical role of programme comprehensiveness, staff professional quality, and psychosocial support depth in improving welfare outcomes for children during and after programme engagement (F. Christopher & Shamirah, 2025). Family reintegration support showed the weakest but significant correlation ($r = 0.561$, $p < .01$), despite being the most severely under-resourced dimension — a finding that paradoxically reinforced the importance of reintegration investment, as even the limited support provided was significantly associated with improved outcomes.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.764	0.584	0.577	0.616	27.83	< .001

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Table 4: Regression Coefficients-Predictors of Child Welfare Outcomes, Kampala Central Division

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.584	0.261		2.238	.027
Child Protection Policy Impl.	0.357	0.078	0.364	4.577	< .001
Rehabilitation Programme Quality	0.296	0.082	0.320	3.610	< .001
Family Reintegration Support	0.231	0.076	0.265	3.039	.003

Source: Field Data, 2025

Dependent Variable: Child Welfare Outcomes

The regression model was significant ($F = 27.83$, $p < .001$), explaining 58.4% of variance in child welfare outcomes ($R^2 = 0.584$). Child protection policy implementation was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < .001$), confirming the primacy of legal protection enforcement in determining welfare outcomes (Julius & Betty, 2026). Rehabilitation quality was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.320$, $p < .001$). Family reintegration support, while least influential ($\beta = 0.265$, $p = .003$), still made a significant contribution — particularly important given that reintegration was both the least resourced and the most outcome-critical dimension of the policy response.

6.4 Structural Equation Model and Path Analysis

Table 5: SEM Fit Indices-Street Children Social Policy Model, Kampala Central Division

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Assessment
χ^2 / df	2.24	< 3.0	Good fit
CFI	0.954	≥ 0.95	Good fit
RMSEA	0.065	< 0.08	Acceptable
SRMR	0.057	< 0.08	Good fit
GFI	0.937	≥ 0.90	Good fit

Source: Field Data, 2025**Table 6: Structural Path Coefficients-Street Children Social Policy SEM, Kampala Central**

Path	Std. β	SE	CR	p	Decision
Child Protection Policy $\rightarrow$ Welfare	0.341	0.079	4.316	< .001	Supported
Rehabilitation Quality $\rightarrow$ Welfare	0.302	0.083	3.639	< .001	Supported
Reintegration Support $\rightarrow$ Welfare	0.247	0.077	3.208	.001	Supported
Policy Impl. $\rightarrow$ Rehab Quality (med. path)	0.421	0.086	4.895	< .001	Supported
Indirect: Policy $\rightarrow$ RQ $\rightarrow$ Welfare	0.127	0.039	3.256	.001	Supported

Total Effect: Child Protection Policy → Welfare	0.463				
Total Effect: Rehabilitation Quality → Welfare	0.302				
Total Effect: Reintegration Support → Welfare	0.247				

Source: Field Data, 2025

The SEM revealed that rehabilitation programme quality partially mediated the child protection policy–welfare relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.127$, $p = .001$) (Faridah et al., 2023). This mediation pathway reflected an important systemic logic: effective child protection enforcement brought more children into contact with rehabilitation programmes, such that policy implementation gains partially translated into welfare improvements through their effect on rehabilitation programme uptake and quality (Julius & Audrey, 2025a). The total effect of child protection policy implementation on child welfare ($\beta = 0.463$) substantially exceeded its direct effect ($\beta = 0.341$), confirming that policy implementation improvements would generate compounding welfare benefits through the rehabilitation quality pathway (Brian et al., 2024).

7.0 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The study establishes that urban social policy implementation was a significant but severely under-resourced determinant of street children's welfare outcomes in Kampala Central Division, with the three policy dimensions collectively explaining 58.4% of welfare outcome variance (Julius & Audrey, 2025b). The consistently low mean scores across all policy dimensions (2.87–3.24) documented a systemic implementation failure that contrasted sharply with the richness of Uganda's legal and policy framework for child protection—confirming that policy design quality was not the binding constraint, but rather the implementation capacity, coordination architecture, and resource adequacy that determined whether policy commitments translated into children's lived welfare improvements (Julius & Audrey, 2026a). Recommendations: (i) development of a Kampala Street Children Elimination Strategy 2025–2030 with clear inter-agency roles, measurable targets, and dedicated funding streams; (ii) establishment of a KCCA-chaired Street Children Coordination Secretariat with mandatory participation from Police, Probation, Health, Education, and the NGO coalition; (iii) expansion of family reintegration support packages to include conditional cash transfers for receiving families, bi-weekly social worker home visits, and guaranteed school re-enrolment support for 24 months post-placement; (iv) professionalization of the social work cadre working with street children through mandatory licensing, competitive salaries, and structured supervision systems; and (v) advocacy for dedicated budget line allocation for street children services in KCCA's annual budget as a constitutional obligation under the Children Act.

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